TOUCHING CLOUD

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Touching Cloud

An Adventure Story

BY

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Authors of "Back of Beyond"

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Touching Cloud

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CHAPTER I

THE TRAGEDY CAR

SUCCESSIVE ups and downs, with the accent as sharply on one as the other, varied the Four States trail that led to the Grand Mesa. Negotiating them easily progressed a magnificent white-stockinged sorrel. Astride him, looking part of him, rode a man of about thirty-five, Alexander Quinby, of anywhere in general and nowhere in particular.

Negligence was in the hang of his long, strong legs, which the stirrups had been lengthened to fit. Quiet was on his lightly weathered face. At first glance he looked as if he belonged to the uptilted terrain of the region, as if this morning's ride were part of a daily program. Only a close-up of his eyes would have dispelled the illusion—of eyes intensely black, active, appreciative. A gleam was in them as they left the sky, the growths fringing the Four States, the erratic trail itself, to rest upon the head of his horse.

Slumping forward, he scratched with lean, companionable fingers the scruff of the sorrel's name. "Red Bill, you darned old white socks!" was all he said; but the tone in which he said it matched his eyes—intense, appreciative, glad.

William waggled both ears at once—for him a sign

of joy multiplied by two. Used to the succinctness of the man on his back, "Straight-talk Alec" Quinby, he well knew that a great deal more was meant than said. The feel of those fingers, in conjunction with the tone and the pressure of the knees, might have been amplified into speech something like this:

"I reckon you know how dinged delighted I am to get back, Bill. There never was a hoss fitted me like you, and this honest-to-God country looks better to me than any chunk of East or West I've loafered around since I went away. I calculated you wouldn't make any objection to the distance to-day. It sure has been a right stiff little pull, but it's our first for a long time, eh, boy? Just one more corkscrew climb, now. Then we'll breeze across the verde, maybe wave a howdy-do to 'The Brat' if she happens to be at the trading post, splash through Cherry Bush Creek, and pull up standing at our own agency corral!"

That the distance contemplated in "breeze," "splash" and "pull up" was a matter of ten miles atop the twenty from Circle Center already covered that morning meant, indeed, as little to William as to the man. The waggle of his ears promised compliance with any suggestion on this gala occasion; a whinny added a note of eagerness. Stretching his stride, the sorrel undertook the next "up" in gallant part.

Quinby's eyes lifted from his mount to renewed appreciation of the dusty, scrubby, choppy region. He was pleased to the heart over his return. Those bronze-green stretches of upland and downland were more like home to him than any of the many for-

eign parts among which his grown-up life had been spent. To them he had come back once before—several years ago—to settle down, and the name he had then given to the Indian agency—Rolling Stone—had been in honor of the career that he believed was abandoned for all time.

But to him there had come promotion. This was the most important happening in his variegated life up to date, which had taken him away again to continued wanderings—although wanderings official and of definite objective—as came with the responsibilities of an inspector of the United States Indian bureau, a moss gatherer over many tribes.

That his return of to-day to the agency and the tepees of the Utes was due to a mission, esteemed by his government as of considerable gravity, in nowise weighted his mood. Rather, in the surcease of more important considerations, there arose in his mind certain bashful but persistent thoughts of a possible mission of his own.

With the frequency of his home-return contemplations, these thoughts had teased him. Ceasing to resist them, considering them with open mind, he had come to like them, frankly to welcome them.

They were centered on the picture of the everlasting girl; but a girl, this, of golden hair, of eyes very brown and very kind, of soft curves and gentle, appealing voice and—what was in his mind superlatively desirable—of the schooling which he had needed to teach himself.

Rather ruefully, he grinned at himself as he reached up to substantiate the feel of a flush under

the lightish tan of his cheeks. The shrug of his shoulders, however, excused him.

Well, he need not be ashamed of it, they seemed to say. Almost everything he had remembered of this or that had proved worth while in his career. The fact that he remembered the little schoolma'am, after many of her sex were forgotten, proved on its face, did it not, that she, too, was worth while?

Anyhow it was good to be returning to old friends. The early morning had brought the first of these in his reunion with Red William, from whom the necessities of his itinerant occupation had compelled separation. Of all the horses he had owned, Bill was best beloved. It was good just to feel the play of the splendid shoulders beneath his saddle blanket; it was better to realize that the joy was mutual—from the first sniff of recognition as he had entered the pasture at daybreak, the sorrel had been heartwhole in his welcome.

From other friends, old and newer, white and red, he could count on characteristic demonstration. Wasn't there Illinoi' Hutchinson, the trader, and Illinoi's spitfire young daughter, Winona, recently referred to as "The Brat?" And Custer Revell, the queer little Easterner, into whose charge, not without misgiving, he had turned over the agency—wouldn't he have much to report? And surely Miss Violet Trenholm, she of the gold and brown, the curves and voice of appeal, she who had come on a visit and remained to teach the ideas of the little Utes how best to shoot—surely she would be kind to him as she was to everybody else, whether or not she remembered him as especially as he did her!

Undemonstrative, but sincere, he hoped, would be the greeting of the Indian contingent, from venerable Chief White Leaf down to misnamed Angry, the joker of the red-skinned pack. Certainly he considered them friends in the best sense of the word. Friendship begot friendship, didn't it? And had not he come looking for opportunity to help them for reasons other than to make his mission a success? Help they needed sorely, if reports to the bureau carried any truth.

He was anticipating the joy of duty and pleasure combined when he was jolted back to the immediate present. William had rounded the last twist of Corkscrew and now came to a mid-road stop, his snort full of suspicion. Quinby glanced ahead, then touched the swelling ribs with an unspurred heel. When additional suggestion became advisable, he overcame his habitual reluctance to speak unless necessary.

"Only a stalled flivver, you fool Bill; 'long with you!"

But William evidently preferred his own advice. He side-stepped to the ditch, objecting vehemently to the idea of advance.

In Quinby, who knew his horse, interest was aroused. He surveyed the prospect ahead more attentively, his lids narrowing. And there did look something decidedly unnatural in the attitude of the three occupants of the small, dust-covered car. They seemed as stalled as the motor—the driver doubled over the steering wheel, one passenger draped over the back of the front seat, the other dangling half out of the tonneau.

"Take back what I called you, Bill," was his acknowledgment of something wrong.

He swung from the saddle and advanced on foot, leading his mount. A few yards nearer, he dropped the reins and sprang forward. Signs of a highway disturbance had become unmistakable.

The forward-bent driver first had his attention. "Dead!" he muttered.

When he had straightened the man back into the seat, he recognized him, despite the distortion of a bullet wound between the eyes, as one Ollie Marsden, a white, who had run a jitney-stage service out of Circle Center.

The passenger draped over the seat back from a stand in the tonneau proved to be an Indian, his face grotesquely painted in blue and green. From his mouth dangled a flexible tube of white rubber which disappeared into a tank built under the right half of the front seat and stenciled on the lid with the legend "Reserve Gasoline."

"Dead!" muttered Quinby again. But after a sniff at the opening in the tank, he corrected himself: "Dead drunk!"

The third occupant of the tragedy car was still alive, as his convulsive breathing showed. From his sprawled position half over the side of the car, he looked to have been shot down when about to leap out. Closer examination developed two wounds—a graze past his temple and along the left side of his scalp, and a center shot in the right shoulder. He was a stranger to Quinby, a prosperous individual, to judge by his portly appearance and well-tailored suit.

After easing him back against the worn cushion of the tonneau, the inspector unstrapped a canteen from the side of the car, smelled it to make certain that the liquid within was what it should be, and then made a liberal application of water. The stranger stirred; after a second douche he opened his eyes.

There came a cry of alarm as his mind resumed its function. He half raised himself from the cushion, only to sink back with a groan from the instant protest of his shoulder wound.

"Take it easy," advised Quinby. "Whatever happened is over and done. You're through without any serious damage."

The reincarnated fright of the man was not so easily put aside. For a moment he stared into Quinby's face. "You're—a white man?" he asked, as if to reassure his eyes.

"At least one hundred per cent."

"Thank Heaven! The redskins? Where are the shooting devils?"

A frown marred the quiet of the inspector's face at the intimation. He had come to solve a problem in red and seemed to have come upon a fresh splotch of it. Somewhat crisply, he advised the victim to buck up and supply him with the details of what had happened.

Doubtless still dazed from shock, the mind of the man in tweeds continued to run on a single track. He felt his shoulder, then his head. Horror caught him anew when his hand showed a mark of his own blood.

"Why—why, I'm done for—murdered!" he cried.

"Scratched," Quinby corrected him. "Take a brace now and let's have what happened."

Reaching into the car, he raised the man to a sitting position, only to have him fall back into a fresh swoon at sight of the upturned face of the Ute who had temporarily passed away. Before restoring him to consciousness with a fresh application from the canteen, Quinby threw a dust robe over the drunk.

When again propped up and assured that the buck was in no condition to be dangerous, the stranger made an effort to comply with the inspector's demands upon his coherency.

He was, he stated, Martin Chalmers, of Los Angeles, interested in the development of a mine over in Boulder Cañon, well beyond the Grand Mesa. He was on his way there with five thousand dollars in cash to pay off his men and purchase a couple of claims that adjoined the group he already owned. In Circle Crater he had hired Ollie Marsden to drive him there by the short-cut trail on which he had met disaster.

"We were spinning along peacefully enough," he went on, "me watching the landscape pass by, when we rounded a turn and found the road blocked by that tree. As Marsden threw on the brakes for a quick stop, four Indians in war paint rode out of the brush, yelling like fiends and shooting regardless as they came. I heard just one word, 'Utes!' from the driver before the windshield splintered and he toppled over the wheel. I started to spring from the car, meaning to take to the brush with the cash, when a ton of bricks or something of equal weight

hit me. I—I don't remember another thing until I woke up just now and found you bending over me."

"Humph! Ever tote a gun?" Quinby inquired mildly.

"Yes, of course, but I didn't once think of my weapon. Who would with four painted hellions coming at him and the driver already done for?" Chalmers' uninjured arm curved around his body and his hand slipped into a hip pocket. "Why—why, my automatic's gone!" he exclaimed.

His indignation and amaze were so incongruous after the violent encounter described, that Quinby smiled in spite of himself and the situation. "Of course it's gone," he remarked. "How about the pay roll?"

Chalmers grabbed at his breast pocket, regardless of possible pain to the wounded shoulder.

"That, too!" His voice had an even more desperate ring than when he had declared himself murdered. "Five thousand in bills—mostly small ones. Think of that, man—five thousand! I had the roll safety-pinned inside this pocket. The thieves—they've cleaned me out."

Quinby's eyes held speculatively upon a heavy gold watch chain, draped across the considerable waistcoat. "Got any idea what time it was when Ollie put on the brakes for the tree?" he asked.

The mine owner, it seemed, had looked at his watch just before. He remembered that it had been ten o'clock.

"And it's now——"

As the inspector drew out from his worn corduroys and consulted an unfobbed silver timepiece,

Chalmers, after the habit of man, which makes him yawn when another yawns, and always consult his own watch when told the time, lifted a pretentious gold one from his vest pocket.

"Humph!" was the substance of Quinby's comment.

As a matter of fact, he was not surprised at the computed lapse of time. William had negotiated the Corkscrew in leisurely fashion, but, although the prevailing breeze was favorable, no sound of fulsillade had carried to his ears. And no one, red or white, had he passed on the road.

Something did puzzle him, however. His eyes, so startlingly black and intense in his emotionless face, still gazed speculatively upon the watch in Chalmers' hand. At their corners, the wrinkles made early in life by the prairie glare deepened and looked to be arrows pointing toward the perplexity within. There was one decidedly peculiar feature in such a holdup; how could thieving Utes have overlooked that ornate chain, or have resisted that watch?

CHAPTER II

SIXES AND SEVENS

TO Straight-talk Quinby words always had seemed the hardest means of expression. From his characteristic scarcity of them and the pointedness of such as he did use had come his most popular sobriquet. Now, although still far from effusive in his expression of sympathy over the prosperous civilian's plight, he lost no further time in administering first aid.

The compact emergency kit which his saddlebag carried furnished the requisite antiseptic and bandages; his strong fingers performed the task with deftness and dispatch.

While working he mentally weighed the neglected opportunity presented by the gold watch and chain. In the process he used the scales of his intimate knowledge of Indian character.

Love of personal adornment supplied the heaviest balance. There seemed no chance that four pairs of born-keen eyes, sharpened to supersight by years of trailing, could have overlooked that shining loop across the considerable waistcoat or failed to follow it to the veritable pot o' gold at its rainbow end.

Atop this improbability was the native's passion for anything that ticked. He had known many a brave to swing a nickel alarm clock upon his chest, although the sun—or one's stomach when Sol was

clouded over—was usually consulted regarding the time of day. Cautious as a fox though the Ute was in many particulars, he could scarcely be expected to overcome his "tick-tock" obsession with the professional thief's shyness of monogrammed jewelry.

The watch and chain might have been the share of loot assigned to the Indian now slumbering sonorously under the dust robe. Just possibly he had discovered the possibilities of the whisky-filled tank, camouflaged as "gas," and had postponed collection until after he had quenched the thirst that had proved his undoing. Acting on that thought, Quinby affixed the last bandage pin and turned to the brave as the logical next step in his investigation.

Removal of the dust robe showed features that had a familiar look, despite the blue-green paint quartering, worn probably in lieu of the proverbial bandanna mask of the white road agent. It was when his eyes measured the length of the magnificent recumbent figure, however, that recognition burst upon him.

There was only one buck in the Rolling Stone unit who could boast the six feet two or three of this one when standing erect. "Touching Cloud!" he exclaimed under his breath, his surprise acute.

Supporting the dead weight of the Indian against his shoulder, he turned the well-featured, but horribly colored face toward Chalmers.

"Ever see this buck before?" he asked.

The mining man shuddered, turned his eyes away, and then forced them back for full inspection.

"He looks like—like all four of them," he declared. "There wasn't time—— No one could have

been taking tabs on the looks of each, I tell you, when the whole hellish pack——"

"How about the paint pony yonder?" Quinby gestured toward a scraggly pinto, conspicuously splotched in red and white and wearing "leather," which had emerged from the bush and now stood exchanging mannerly nose rubs with William.

"The spotted horse!" There could be no doubt of Chalmers' recognition in this case or of his excitement. "That one was the first I saw. He led the rush. The fiend on his back was the first to shoot."

Quinby studied the pinto's saddle, made of buckskin, tightly stretched over a crude frame and studded with square-headed brass nails. It was undoubtedly of Ute construction and would be easily identified.

"Looks like the goods on Touching Cloud," he remarked aloud, pushing the Indian off his shoulder with a movement of repugnance.

"Touching what?" queried Chalmers.

"The same. Son of Push Ahead, second chief of the Rolling Stone Utes."

"You recognize this thief and murderer—you know him!"

Such scorn and suspicion was in the throaty voice that Quinby prodded himself to a few sentences more or less on the side.

"You see, stranger," he replied, "I was Indian agent here a few years ago. Am now an inspector in the service. The Cloud was a lick-and-a-promise of a youth. Kind of polished up he was by some few trips away to school and all that. Never heard of him running amuck. Must have changed his trail

since I've been in foreign parts. Looks like his horse had a good opinion of him yet, don't it, the way he's waiting around for him! Sure you recognize the pinto?"

Chalmers had no doubt of the animal's identity. Indeed, on reviewing the several exciting seconds of the rush, he declared himself about ready to swear that Touching Cloud had led the band. "But what I can't see is why he didn't beat it with the others?" he remarked, puzzled.

"That's no poser," Quinby returned. "Ollie Marsden drove a jitney from outside in, but was a bootlegger inside out. He was in bad even before I left, but we never could quite rope him at it. This tank marked 'Reserve Gasoline' tells how he carried his supply. Likely the Cloud was hep, and once he got in chained-lightning connection couldn't let go, no matter what happened or what didn't."

Ignoring Chalmers' exclamations as to what he would be if he had ever heard the like of such a thing before, which was, in truth, more or less inconsequential, Quinby bent to examine the ingenuous cache. There could be no doubt of the contents of the tank. The reek of the uncorked opening could come only from whisky of the high-proof distillation illegally served to Indians by unscrupulous white runners.

It was not for a sampling test that he leaned closer—that was unnecessary after one whiff of its raw breath—but to examine the tank.

He stumbled back, however, as though he actually had swallowed four fingers of the stuff, said to be served with whisk brooms in places that have sawdust

on the floor—the brooms for the brush-off said to be needed when the drinker rises from his supposedly immediate overthrow. He had come upon a second surprise feature of the holdup, one even more baffling than that of the unstolen watch.

The secret whisky tank was full—so brimful that not a single dram could have been drawn from it. Yet across the seat back stretched the overlong form of Touching Cloud, in a back-breaking position which he could not have endured had he been sober!

With no remark to Chalmers, whose interest in further explanation or investigation had been distracted by an effort to sooth the pains of his throbbing head, Quinby took up the rubber tube and examined it closely. The length which had been inserted into the tank was whisky wet. Taking out his knife, he cut off a section of the end detached from between the Indian's clenched teeth and slit it. The rubber showed no trace of moisture. Not a drop of anything had been drawn through it.

Yet there lay the splendid Touching Cloud, his breath heavy with the reek of rotgut, as overcome as a human could be from liquor.

"Must have taken the best or worst of a quart to put him to by-by that way," mused Quinby in thought. "Drunk without a drink. That sounds plumb loco. What's the answer?"

He could think of none. He passed the idea of consulting Chalmers who obviously had troubles enough of his own. For double reasons it seemed best to hurry on to the agency. There the mining man could have further attention, and the alarm

could be given for the three renegades who had got away.

But first he wanted a look around that he might note anything of interest in the outskirts of the scene before it was disturbed.

Especially did the fallen tree interest him, since there had been no recent windstorm and the green branches testified that the trunk was still full of sap. As he expected, the ground about the stump was strewn with fresh chips. The obstruction had been felled deliberately with an ax.

Did this fact augur that the robbers had acted on advance information of Chalmers' trip with the Boulder pay roll? Not necessarily, he decided, since, from the vantage point of any near-by crag, Ollie Marsden's machine might have been seen as it entered upon the corkscrew climb in ample time to have felled the tree.

Quinby entered the brush, whence, according to the mining man, the raiders had emerged. The ground showed that several horses had been clumped there recently and had departed with a flying start. He took care not to disturb the tracks which might tell a great deal more to the trailers from the agency than they did to him.

Satisfied that there was nothing more of interest to be seen, he returned to the car and prepared for the drive across the mesa. He replaced the cushion over the whisky tank, after corking it, and pocketing the tube. Chalmers, torn with complaint, he helped move to a seat upon it. The transfer of the dead weight of Marsden's body to the floor of the tonneau taxed his strength, but he managed to lay it beside that of

the Indian who obligingly had rolled off the seat back —and without wakening. The dust robe served to cover them both.

His passengers ready, there remained to the inspector's ingenuity the removal of the obstructing tree trunk. This William helped him to drag far enough to one side to give room for the passage of the overloaded car. With not so good grace did the spirited animal submit to the ignominy of a lead rope, but he cheered obviously when another tether forced the Ute's pinto to trail him.

Quinby threw on the spark, cranked the motor, and jumped in beside the wheel. He stepped on the gas and the car started with a jerk, but only to move a few yards. Then the engine went dead. Although not an expert driver, in fact having only an emergency knowledge of motor operation, he knew enough to place the fault as lack of gasoline.

It seemed passing odd that a man of the late Ollie's experience, one who had made a business of runs across the desert and into the garageless wilds, should have started for Boulder Cañon without a sufficient supply for the trip there and back. No possibility of misjudgment could excuse so early a failure of supply. And, of course, the departed jitneyist had known that his "Henry" would not drink the contents of the alleged reserve tank. How then had the supply run short?

An over-shoulder glance to the spot in the road where the car had been standing answered comprehensively. A puddle spotted the surface of the non-absorbent rock dust; from it the track of a small stream led into the trailside gully. Beside the puddle

lay the screw cap placed in the bottom of gasoline tanks, to be removed only when it is necessary to empty them of sediment. Evidently the thieves had provided against any possibility of the car being used in their pursuit.

"So-ho! So-ho!" mused the inspector.

An unstolen gold watch, an Indian brave drunk without a drink, a gasoline tank emptied by some one with more knowledge of an automobile than was creditable to any Ute of his acquaintance!

"Sixes and sevens!" he commented aloud.

"What say?" Querulously the only conscious victim roused from his especial miseries to ask.

Quinby grinned at him. "I like to count to myself," he said.

With a more flattering show of interest, he walked over to his horse and addressed him. "Say, Bill, the dinged buggy's run out of the go-stuff. I dast ask a self-respecting equine like you, aided and abetted by a war-snort nag like yon pinto, to tote a flivver as far as Illinoi' Hutchinson's?"

CHAPTER III

THE BELOVED BRAT

THE inspector had planned an inconspicuous entry into his old stamping ground—just the casual, "howdy-do" sort of return he would have made if gone a few days or weeks. He wished to create the impression of having happened back among them, to shake the hand of a red friend here, to visit the tepee of another there. In short, to insinuate himself into their life without questions or suspicions.

In this wise, he had hoped soonest and most accurately to learn tribal history from the inside since his departure and to gauge future possibilities. To trundle upon the Grand Mesa, therefore, at the wheel of a two-horse-power, gasless car freighted with tragedy was a disappointment to him personally, and a menace to his official mission.

His regrets were manifold, principally for the wave of excitement upon which he must arrive and for the lawless outbreak which the testimony of the survivor laid so directly at the door of his Indian friends. Although Ollie Marsden had been proved a scoundrel of a particularly despicable kind, and his unauthorized finish a benefit rather than loss to their little world, punishment for his murder must be inflicted. Toll also must be exacted for the wounding of Chalmers and the theft of his cash.

In view of the unique circumstances, uncovered to

multiply the mystery, the taking of Touching Cloud, seemingly red-handed, was a mighty good start. Yet he could not help berating his luck that to him had fallen the unwelcome distinction of being first upon the scene.

Were he returning preceded by a brass band, the noise of his advent could not have been more startling. That he was bringing in the favorite son of old Push Ahead, a tribal chief, to face a charge of murder, was not calculated to ingratiate him with the Indians at this time, when he needed all his influence over them. While never slow to recognize a duty when he saw one, and not considering the evasion of this, he would gladly have relinquished the credit of discovery and capture to some one who would not be so hampered by it in wider activities.

After certain verbal persuasions of William and some of a more forcible nature upon the pinto, he had been able to rope into a team his dual "power," and to hitch them to the small car. Although the load on pneumatic tires was not unduly heavy, the pair had made considerable objection to topping the grade. Indeed, only after Quinby had appealed to William in his most heartfelt, man-to-horse tones to come up to the scratch, had this been accomplished.

Once over the grade, his improvised twin motor went ahead at a trot. His hands were full, one directing the steering wheel, the other manipulating the ropes that served as reins. They were now bearing down upon the trading post of his old friend Illinoi' Hutchinson, where he hoped to replenish his gasoline supply.

The trader's establishment was situated in a cup

which, from a distance, would have resembled a lake, had the grass in its bottom been green instead of brown. In the center, like ships moored to cottonwood buoys, lay anchored the log buildings—a wide-flung store, whose shelves held that little of everything of the Far West post. It was a sizable cabin with a gallery across the front, in which the patriarch dwelt with no complaint against the hit-or-miss housekeeping of his one daughter; a bunk house for the accommodation of transients; a barn with its attendant corral.

Quinby's eyes cleared of trouble as he surveyed the familiar scene, his mind filling with reminiscences of the pleasant leisure hours he had spent there in agency days. Except for an idiosyncratic tendency toward references to happenings "way back in old Illinoi'—God's country, sir," the silver-haired trader had been a diverting companion. And Winona, his first and only born, widely known by the favorite parental term of endearment, "Beloved Brat"—always had she been a source of interest to him, whether that interest leaned toward amusement, indignation, or fear. What with her barbed-wire defense against his big-brother teasing, and her sorties into the offensive of tormenting him, their acquaintance had never been dull.

Although only seventeen when he had left, the girl already had given promise of developing into an excellent synonym of the Arabic definition of a "man"—able to ride, shoot, and speak the truth. She could "stick to leather" with marvelous tenacity, had an intimate understanding with her gun which could

make it do all sorts of surprising things, and *how* she could tell the truth!

Indeed, this last attribute she had developed to a point where it scarcely could have seemed longer a virtue, even to the most devout Arabian. There was nothing her tongue did not dare, no sacred feeling secure from its edge.

Though immune from coquetries in her thick, single pigtail, she had caused Quinby often openly to pity the unfortunate man she would one day drag to the altar, "rope, hog-tied, covered." Perhaps, after the way of the open, she had already found the victim; perhaps, even, in the responsibilities of matrimony, the attitude of scornful little Winona had softened toward the world.

A high call waved toward Quinby on the wind. Startled, he glanced up from his ambidextrous task, to see—— Well, it was as if he had pressed some magic wishing ring. A stranger—and yet one whom he recognized at a glance as all there was left of a friend—came riding toward him at a breakneck pace.

He had opportunity for but one glance, for almost immediately she disappeared into a wash in the rim of the cup, essaying a short cut. But there was no mistaking the identity of the white palfrey, even had he been in doubt as to that of the bareheaded rider. No female creature of the region ever took a cut bank in that regardless style, none had a voice with such a ring in it as that what had just sounded, except Winona Hutchinson.

Anxiety for her evidently had caught the man with whom she had been riding, for he pushed his roan to follow over the tangent and overtake her.

Quinby had not recognized him at the distance, nor did he when, a moment later, the two came out upon the trail together.

And almost did he fail to recognize Winona when she came close, so changed was she from a hoyden whom one could think of as Brat, even a beloved one. Her figure, although still slim and muscular, was no longer that of a growing girl. Curves had graced the shoulders, the long arms, the turn of throat. And the uncompromisingly slicked-back pigtail was no more! Instead was piled atop her head, with an elaboration that bespoke care for its becomingness, a glory of soft, blue-black coils. And from the waves just above her forehead—what had never been there before—rose a strand of silver-white, like a plume.

Beneath the strangely adorned crown, her face, too, had changed. The Brat's cheeks had been thin and almost colorless, where not freckled over by the sun, her eyes ofttimes pathetic in the asking look of children who long to know. But the cheeks of her into whom the Brat had been metamorphosed were oval and flushed like a rose; her eyes looked gay and confident and bluer by far than the sky overhead from behind their long black lashes. Her lips were the scarlet of physical well-being, her teeth—— Well, always had her teeth been the marvel of all her hard-scoured responsibilities.

All these changes he had seen in the flash before it became necessary to respond to her elaborate opening salute. Her horse pulled up and her forehead bent almost to touch the horn of her saddle in an exaggerated salaam, she had cried: "Greetings, O

Lord of the Earth! The unworthiest of your admirers salutes!"

"Greetings, O Winona!" he forced himself to make grandiloquent reply. "The most astonished of *your* admirers greets you."

"You may be astonished, but you knew me mighty quick." She looked quite disappointed. "Suppose you tell me pronto, did you drop out of the clouds in that funny-looking chariot? And why didn't you give a honk or two of your august approach?"

Now Straight-talk really wished to rise to the occasion, no matter how greatly it might deplete his scant store of words, but he was puzzled over her mock servility and ambitious form of address. Her next impatient question, however, was enlightening.

"Or is the disguised outfit prescribed by Federal regulation for Indian inspectors?"

She knew, of course, of his new rank in the service, but why should she so quickly assail it and him? He retorted with what spirit he could: "Say, if you're poking fun at my flivver, excuse it for not seeming to appreciate the joke—being all out of laughing gas."

Her laugh was interrupted by the quite resplendent escort who had ranged up beside her.

"You might remember me and introduce us before you do for him entirely," he suggested.

"A flock of pardons, Sandy, for delaying your presentation," she begged, with another salaam toward Quinby. "Your serene highness—although I might remark you look kind of ruffled—permit me to meet you to Seven-eleven—seventy-seven, otherwise Mr. Arthur Mills. He's the original 'Mills of

the Gods,' as you might suspect by his looks, although not nearly so slow as they make out. And he never grinds—not our Artie! Needless to diagram you to him, O Most Illustrious!"

During her irrepressible persiflage the two men had nodded almost gravely. As the searching black eyes met the gray pair a flash of recognition came to Quinby. Somewhere in the past he had met the younger man before. But even while groping to place the impression it vanished, as such impressions do the moment one's sight becomes used to the new.

CHAPTER IV

PROMPT ACTION

MILLS had removed his sombrero, baring a thick crop of wavy light hair. Certainly he looked a fine specimen, large and finely muscled of figure; positively handsome of face—altogether a suitable companion for the girl so vivid of manner and coloring. Her reference to him as Mills of the Gods, when adjudged by the proud glance she had thrown his way, was probably the only sincere bit, so far, in her speech.

"You two hombres have at least one thing in common," she was saying. "You both are dead set on running things."

"Well, that needn't worry you," her horseback gallant returned, laughing. "Neither of us would be so bold as to attempt——"

"Say, leave me out of it!" she snapped. "I'll worry along running myself, as I've done since birth, but I haven't seen a good scrap for a long time. Let me know, won't you, when you two start trying out your talent on each other?"

Quinby smiled more easily. Almost did the Brat of years before seem with them again. "Just what place did that little problem in arithmetic have in your introduction just now?" he inquired.

"Seven-eleven—the answer is seventy-seven, isn't it? I might as well tell you at the start that I've

been away to school since last we met and know a lot of things that come in handy. You see, seven-eleven is Sandy Mills' number as the Utes get it to their sorrow. He not only owns the Star Square Ranch, between here and the county seat, but is the head of our new Law and Order League—a regular rip-snorting mentor over the whole Four States region."

The Indian inspector glanced at the horseman with new interest. The Law and Order League, modern vigilantes, had been referred to in the report accompanying his assignment to investigate the troublesome Rolling Stone situation. So far its activity had been well within the law, limited to the apprehension of Indian suspects and their confinement in the county jail at Circle Center awaiting trial. There had been threats, however, as the depredations continued, of more drastic action on their part; in fact, part of the task set him was to see that there should be no reversion to the "necktie parties" of the organization's prototype of border days. Perhaps, the thought flashed through his mind, Winona's portent of a scrap between them had been from prescience.

A groan of impatience from the man seated beside him drew the attention of the mounted two and pointed his own social lapse.

"And allow me," he said with a flourish equal to the girl's own, "to meet you to Mr. Chalmers of Los Angeles. He had—well, a slight accident over on the grade and is not feeling just what you'd call sociable."

"That looks like—it sure is Ollie Marsden's car!" Sudden inspiration showed in Winona's tone and glance.

Quinby, seeing no need of her knowing the gruesome nature of the load he carried in the car under the dust robe, sought to divert her. "It is Ollie's car and it needs the laughing gas aforementioned worse than Chalmers here does a surgeon, especially if you're going to spring any more of those things you learned at school. You used to be an obliging little cuss when a pard was really up against it. I'm wondering if you'd mind riding on to the post and having your parent draw a few gallons from his emergency supply, so we can toot along to the doctor man's. Your friend can ride along with me if he doesn't mind."

But once a brat, always a brat; that was proved forthwith.

With the uncanny penetration he had learned to fear in the child, this fine young lady rewarded his long speech with a scornful glance, then a call of his ruse.

"I'm sitting in this game, Alec Quinby. I'd thank you to deal me a hand. Something's happened. I'm free, white and somewhat twenty-one—entitled to be in the know every bit as much as a mere friend. What's up? What have you done with Ollie?"

Realizing from experience the futility of trying to spare her, now that her suspicion of trouble had been aroused, Quinby shrugged his shoulders. "He was done for—Ollie—before I sloped into the scene. Sorry to tell you this, Nona, but you've got to prepare for a shock."

With what fitness he might for the two small, excitement-reddened ears that listened, the inspector told briefly of finding the stalled car and its oddly as-

sorted passengers—all of it except those later details of observation which had surprised and particularly interested him.

While Chalmers vociferated confirmation of this report, Mills swung from his saddle and raised the robe. For a horrified moment, he stared down at Quinby's dead-drunk prisoner and the driver, truly dead. He stepped aside only when it became necessary to cover the sight from the eyes of Winona, who had ridden closer.

The air of authority with which he urged her back did not escape Quinby's notice any more than did her unusual compliance. Evidently Mills of the Gods had gained an influence over the regional imp.

"Let me congratulate you, inspector." Right heartily the young man offered his hand. "This is the first time these red devils have dared murder, and it is a satisfaction to know that one of them has been taken under circumstances of sure conviction. He'll touch a cloud, sure enough, when the jury gets the facts."

"Oh, not Touching Cloud—he is not your suspect?" Winona cried. "I thought I recognized his pinto, but never dreamed—— There must be some mistake. He's as straight running a buck as there is in the tribe."

"Wouldn't trust any of them; especially with a drink or two of hooch aboard," declared Mills. "The Cloud looks as if he'd been mopping it up wholesale. We must get him to jail and start the boys on the trail of the other three. Ollie Marsden had his faults, we'll all admit, but his death has got to be avenged."

"And my money——" began Chalmers.

"We'll get the precious trio, like as not, when they begin spending your money," the young rancher assured him. "You were not thinking of offering it as a reward, were you?"

"Let the State pay rewards," objected the man from Los Angeles. I'm entitled to protection, ain't I? I shouldn't wonder but what I have a good suit against the government for this morning's work. These redskins are Federal wards, ain't they? Washington, D. C., ought to settle when they run amuck."

Quite openly Mills laughed at him. "Go as far as you like in that direction. But I say, you near victim, don't go spending your damages until you get them."

"I'll see a lawyer at once," blustered Chalmers with a vehemence which attested that probably he had been suffering more from the loss of his pay roll than from pain of his wounds.

"Better first have him arrange bonds for your appearance at Cloud's trial," suggested the ranchman with merciless significance. "We'll need you as a witness, and I, for one, mean to see you're on hand."

Another groan escaped the lips of the portly mining operator. "Time is money to me," he said.

"Then prepare to squander some!"

Always content to let others do the talking—unless those others were Indians under process of persuasion—Quinby could not help share in the ranchman's disgust that Chalmers should so soon want both his money and his life. However, he rejected the suggestion that maybe the Utes had picked the wrong target for their bull's-eye.

A sudden thrashing movement of the dust robe

brought the inspector to his feet, his gun ready. Touching Cloud had at last come out of his stupor. Now he sat up and blinked around him, rubbing his head. His hand dropped at the sight of the weapon bearing down on him. As it chanced to fall upon the clammy face of the driver, a guttural "Ugh-ugh!" was surprised from his lips.

"Straight-talk—you!" Confusedly he pronounced the name given Quinby by the tribe in agent days.

The inspector nodded. "Yes, Cloud, and here's my latest word—you're under arrest."

"Arrest—for what?"

"Oh, nothing much; just highway robbery and murder."

The Indian's eyes quivered as he grasped the charge, then lowered to the dead man at his knees. Suddenly he lunged upward.

The movement may have been only one of natural aversion; perhaps, on the other hand, it came from an instinctive impulse to escape. His white audience never knew.

But Quinby did not find it necessary to shoot. He was quick with his fists and a jab from his left, catching the up-lengthening Ute under the chin, toppled him back upon the down-turned hood. The blow was a clean knock-out. Before its recipient was capable of further movement, a pair of Law and Order handcuffs, produced by Mills, were clamped about the suspect's wrists.

From the air of pride with which the vigilante leader surveyed the adorned brave, a hopeful idea came to Quinby. The rest of the way to the trading

post he surveyed this with his mind's eye and liked it better with every turn of the wheels.

Perhaps, after all, his desire for that casual brand of return to Rolling Stone need not be denied; possibly his former friendly relations with the Indians need not be strained at the very moment of his reappearance by his accidental rôle of captor of one of them. If this good-looking, affable enthusiast for statute enforcement took to it kindly, all might yet be well.

CHAPTER V

MILLS OF THE GODS

AS the small cavalcade neared the patch of Hutchinson cottonwoods, Quinby motioned Mills to rein in close to the car.

"I'm out here on special business, Mills," he began, "business which needs all the energy and time I can corral. So long as you're among those present, why can't you take over the preliminaries of this murder case?"

A flash of surprise showed in the gray eyes, then the natural pleasure of youth to be so trusted at first sight.

"You mean——" Mills began.

"If I give you charge of the prisoner, victim, and eyewitness—if you run them back to Circle Center for me, I can go about my own affairs. Fact is, I'd like to be left plumb out of it, until my testimony is needed at the trial."

"But I couldn't—it wouldn't be fair for me to take the credit for the capture," protested Mills.

Evidently Winona, who was riding beside him, saw possibilities in the suggestion.

"Why refuse the first command of His High-and-Mightiness, Sandy? If it will help him out, it certainly can't do any harm to your Law and Order standing—might help you more than anything."

"But appropriating another man's scalps——"

"Take them and welcome," urged Quinby with a rueful grin for the fitness of the ranchman's simile. "Don't you get me? I'm asking a favor."

"Oh, if you put it that way!" The younger man showed a frank gratification over the honor so unexpectedly thrust upon him.

The ease and thoroughness with which he later understudied the rôle of master of ceremonies left nothing to be desired. He was first from his horse on their arrival at the Hutchinson post; he was the instigator of the idea that Winona should escort Chalmers to the shade of the gallery before the dwelling cabin. He advised even the inspector over his task of detaching William and the pinto from the indignity of their improvised harness. Mills himself started into the store in search of the veteran trader.

"You'll have to change your tune about the Law and Order League barking up against the wrong tree, Illinoi'," he was saying as he urged Hutchinson down the steps and toward the stalled car. "I'm bringing in the first murderer from your ranch of precious innocents. Caught him red-handed, at that; and for a show-down I'm bringing the corpus delicti along with him; not to mention the eyewitness, all shot up, himself. Yonder he goes with Winona toward the cabin for second aid."

"Murder—murder, you say—corpus delicious—eyewitness?" Hutchinson's white head wagged; his voice quavered distressfully.

"You heard me, old-timer!" insisted the enthusiast. "And murder is exactly what the jury will say to your tame young friend, Touching Cloud, when they come in with the verdict. Justice is going to count

coup on him in record-breaking time or I'm no fit exponent of L. and O. in these parts."

The trader's horrified gaze rested upon the body on the floor of the car—a mute affirmation that capital crime had been done. Then it traveled to the manacled buck, who returned it with only a scowl.

"Why—why—this is an unfortunate thing—a most unfortunate thing! Back in Illinoi'——"

Astonishment interrupted him. He had caught sight of the inspector rounding the car.

"Alexander Quinby or my eyes are liars!" he exclaimed, springing forward with agility that shamed his years. "When did you lope in, my boy?"

"Just stopped a-loping, Hutch. And I'm none peeved to see you."

"You're just in time—as per usual. Mills here seems to have stumbled on a right serious crime which he lays to some of our bucks. I want to know that——"

"I've met the inspector, and he is already conversant with the facts," interrupted the ranchman, with a wink for Quinby and the humor of their plot. "I think he agrees with me that I have an open-and-shut case against the Cloud. It will be only a question of hours and a little energy until we round up the other three wretches."

Quinby surreptitiously returned the wink from honest amusement. The volunteer peace officer certainly had a whole-hearted way of doing a favor, and none could think from the look of him that he begrudged the effort. Perhaps from inherent love of action and command, perhaps to impress his capacity

upon the father of his fair riding mate, he seemed very much to like it.

"You believe that there were four concerned in the hold-up, Mr. Mills?" Quinby asked him respectfully.

"Four's the number. I have that from my eye-witness. They were the Cloud and three other bucks painted up à la the same mode."

At this reference, Hutchinson's eyes returned to the Indian's amazingly decorated features. "I've seen many a brave decorated for war and for the dance," he commented in a slow, troubled way, "but never one in that particular style."

"I suppose you think it's attractive—you seem to admire everything about your pet pests " With a shrug Mills turned from the trader to Quinby. "Is it his passion for keeping customers that makes him pretend to like these good-for-nothing yaller dogs or it is——"

"Tighten the latigo on your tongue, my son, before it slips you for a fall!" interrupted the old man angrily. "My customers appertain nothing in a matter like this. Back in Illinoi' we held that a man was innocent until proved guilty. Green is the color of death in the Ute spectrum, but it ain't used until lay-out time. What I'd like to know is who daubed green paint on the Cloud and why."

Inwardly Quinby applauded his demand. The point raised was one of those he wanted settled—the whole significance of which he intended to know. But because of these very peculiar features, he deemed discretion the better part.

"Likely the Cloud got in kind of a hurry for his mask—likely he didn't pick and choose over the paint

box," he remarked with unwonted deliberation. "What are you going to do with him, Mills?"

"Oh, Sandy will be for parading him through Broadway down at Circle Center," growled the whitebeard. "He'll make one of those there triumphal processions of it, with him a-riding at the head and treating the crowd to a Law and Order spiel before the county jail. I don't like his way of doing things, nohow. Never knew the Cloud guilty of anything more desperate than a thirst. Personally I don't like this here jumping at conclusions and this——"

His further objections were cut short by the return of Winona, who carried a basin of water and a towel.

"As duly constituted deputy sheriff of this county, serving in the interests of the public weal, even though without salary," Mills began generally and somewhat humorously, "it seems to be up to little Artie to take the prisoner in and put him behind the bars." As he spoke, he threw back his coat and displayed a silver badge of office pinned to his shirt.

"Isn't there danger of a lynching party?" suggested Quinby.

"Danger? In my custody, inspector, and with these faithful allies?" With bravado that asserted anew his thorough enjoyment of his important by-proxy duty, the young ranchman tapped the butts of the two guns that decorated his belt.

Quinby eyed these a second, noted that they were old-time revolvers, worn to swing loosely across his thighs. Idly he wondered whether the other could use them with the assurance of his talk.

"But Cloud is an Indian," was his spoken thought.

He glanced at Hutchinson to see if the one apprehension he had felt over relinquishing the prisoner was shared.

"Judge Lynch 'pears to have gone into the discard for good and all in the Four States, Alec," the veteran answered. "He ain't allowed to sit in judgment even on horse thieves these days. Sandy will likely get Cloud to jail all right, but he sure will feed up on admiration of hisself throughout the doing of the same."

"Now, parent"—Winona's reproof later figured in more serious consideration than at the moment—"you're too out and out against our Artie, just because you've got human-nature reasons for not loving him. You'll be the first to doff your Stetson to him when he's made Four States safe for all whites; when we can leave the latchstring out without nailing down the stove. It's not like you, dad, to deny even the devil his due."

"For the benefit of the doubt, I thank you!"

The bow with which the defendant acknowledged the efforts of council on his behalf may have looked a bit exaggerated to older, less exuberant folks, but evidently not so to the girl. Noting her pleased look, Quinby reminded himself of what an ungraceful individual he always had felt before pretty girls; that he must not criticize gallantry just because he could not, for the life of him, have emulated it.

CHAPTER VI

A TENSE MOMENT

WINONA'S kindness of heart was not confined to her admirer. Its sidelight was next shed upon the prisoner.

"Here, you, Cloud," she said, urging the brave to the side of the car. "Mr. Mills is going to tote you to town and we don't want to be any more ashamed of you than we just have to be. You'd better take this golden opportunity of washing your face."

The inspector, watching closely, saw the quickly snuffed flash of appreciation that had lit the young Indian's fine eyes before he reached over with his cuffed members and took the basin. To the surprise of all, however, he raised it to his lips and drank deeply.

"Good!" he muttered gutturally, when the liquor-parched mouth was cooled.

"You sure have reverted to type!" Winona laughed in spite of her exasperation. "A whole lot of good it did you to go to school. What would Teacher Trenholm say if she saw your exhibition of bad manners to-day, to say nothing of your doubtful morals? If you wanted a drink, why didn't you ask for one out of a cup? How can you drink, speak, or even think like a civilized Indian with all that barbaric paint on your face?"

At the mention of Miss Trenholm's name, another besides the buck, started and flushed through his coating of tan as the livid green mask would not allow Cloud to do.

Winona, as if expecting just such a salute, from just that source, laughed. "Hi! you're blushing over teacher like good old times! Well, she's waited around for you, with plenty of suitors but never a husband to her list. Isn't that good news?"

Always consistent in her torments, she paused as if some great issue hung on his reply. And Quinby, knowing by the feel of his face that he was self-convicted, resorted to habit.

"It sure is," he said, straight-talkwise.

The Indian, meantime, had run his hand across his cheeks, then looked to find it clean, the mineral pigment having dried fast. His gaze bore on Winona with a childlike, imploring look that diverted her laughter to him.

"Lost your memory along with your morals and manners, did you?"

Producing a small mirror from the pocket of her riding skirt—an article with which the Brat would have been ashamed to be caught, but which somehow fitted into the tout ensemble of the coquette into which that careless imp had evolved—she held it so that the Cloud could see his startling reflection.

"Billyhell!" he cried. "How?"

The last word was not used in the sense of the racial salutation, rather it was an insistent question. As only reflex queries were on the faces from one to the other of which he looked in turn, he set about removing the gruesome tints, laving his dis-

torted features from the water left after his draft with what speed and thoroughness his handcuffs would permit.

In the inspector's mind was italicized a question put to himself before: *"Didn't that buck know he was painted?"*

The young brave, his countenance revealed in something of its natural, handsome aspect, straightened to the limit of his splendid height, threw out his manacled hands with a gesture of pride and despair; then, lifting his face to the hard blue of the sky, began to chant in a deep, tuneful basso. His words were Ute, but Quinby, as well as Winona and her father, understood and followed them.

"Nothing lives long
Except the earth and mountains.
Nothing dies forever
Except the rock-tank water.
Now the sand hills beckon;
Gladly there go I to dwell forever.
Warm fires and food in plenty,
Shadows dance and know not sorrow."

That Touching Cloud had begun his death song was beyond the doubt of any one who knew the tribe. But why was the chant triumphantly sung, and not as a dirge? Was it a defiant confession of guilt or the resignation of innocence? Was it offered as a weight in the white man's scale of justice, an emotional plea against the capital punishment which conviction might exact? Or did it serve notice on high heaven that, innocent or guilty, this son of a chief was not afraid to die?

Summoned by the innumerable stanzas of the chant, a sedate party of Indians appeared around the corner of the store and approached single file, from the direction of the corral. Doubtless they had been claimed from some pony or blanket trade by the wail which for them had such significance.

Their appearance presented exactly the situation in which Alec Quinby did not wish to appear as a principal. Turning, he crossed to the far side of his horse, bent over and, much to William's sniffed amaze, busied himself with a cinch that did not need tightening. There he listened and waited.

The newcomers numbered four. Leading them stalked Chief Push Ahead, father of the vocalist, as fine looking a specimen of the original American, despite the wrinkles of his leathered skin, as one might see in a round of the reservations. Not quite as tall as his skyscraping descendant, he stood even more erect and approached the group with the lengthy stride from which his name had been derived.

Just behind him ambled Angry, victim of a misnomer and of the rare Indian sense of humor which had bestowed it. Far from acting angry, he could not even look it, because of an upward-curved knife scar upon his cheek which cast his features into a perpetual smile. Following him was Noisy Walk, better dressed than the usual run of Utes, as a sign of his affluence through ponies and steers, but otherwise handicapped by a pedal infirmity.

Bringing up the rear came White Leaf, the venerable head chief of the tribe, in whose thick hair, worn in a pair of dangling braids over his shoulders, not a black strand showed. The redoubtable

old warrior carried himself with a regardless dignity, as if the cause of the death chant could not possibly be a concern of his.

As Push Ahead advanced across the hardpan, his small eyes appraised the situation—his splendid son standing handcuffed in a motor, the Law and Order man near by with arms akimbo, his fingers near the grips of a gun at either hip. But, although his pace stretched perceptibly, his expression of face remained inscrutable.

"You have arrested my son, 'Make Believe?'"

Without having heard Mills so addressed before, Quinby appreciated at once that this was Ute for the official, a name derived from the voluntary sheriffing which they must resent. To them, evidently, he was a make-believe policeman.

"Your eyes don't deceive you, Push," said the deputy. "Cloud is on his way to be punished according to the law of the land. I'm counting coup this time."

The chief took another look at the captive, then one at the car. He grunted, nodded, and then spoke again: "Touching Cloud been drinking of the hooch —ah? There is reason why he should. The law will punish him? That is well. But the law says more—the white man must not sell or give strong water to his red brother. I see Ollie Marsden's devil car. Where is he? Arrest him even as my son, and I say no more."

"It won't necessarily affect the issue what you say," snapped Mills with unfortunate arrogance.

Push Ahead's expression grew more stern. "Arrest Marsden; he sold the bad whisky that has made

my son a fool. Punish him also according to the white man's law and I say it is well."

That a Ute should turn upon a bootlegger was most unusual, but explained by the circumstances.

Illinoi' Hutchinson broke the news, causing mutters of unwonted excitement from the small party of braves. "Ollie Marsden is dead, my friends—can be punished only by the All Great hand."

"What's more," added the young ranchman, "he's been murdered. Step up and have a look at your offspring's first and last victim." Moving to the side of the car, he raised the robe.

With no haste of movement, Push Ahead complied.

But he sent a piercing glance toward his son. The whites read nothing of response. To them the younger Indian's expression did not change so much as a quivered eyelid.

The father, however, evidently had been answered. He stepped back a pace, his left arm upraised. "Touching Cloud is not guilty of this crime," he declared. "The blood of the whisky white does not stain his hands. He has been drunk—maybe so. You punish him for that? It is well. Ten sleeps in the guardhouse let him pay. Teach him the lesson so that he will not forget. But the white law must not punish him for a killing which he did not do. Ten sleeps for the drunk; then you give him back to me."

"Take up all that with the judge, Push!" Mills laughed out of key with what to the Indian was a situation of tragic injustice—that laugh of the empowered white which had caused so much of

bad feeling between the races. "The Cloud answers for murder in the first degree, and there is plenty of rope in Circle."

Evidently hard-learned self-control was battling with the primitive instinct of the chief. The veins stood out on his forehead, his mouth worked, he glanced back to see that his followers were close. The open threat made in the ranchman's pulling of one of his guns from its holster was too much for the savage who was trying to keep the peace.

With a smothered imprecation in his own tongue that at once spoke defiance and a warning, the sub-chief sprang back another pace, moved by regardless rage. His right hand slipped under the blanket he wore, grasped something, and was about to be withdrawn.

The moment had dire probabilities. At any second a gun might speak from the Indian's rank-denoting draperies, or a shot be fired by the nervous fingers of the deputy.

CHAPTER VII

FRIENDLY ENEMIES

TO the inspector the accomplishment of years of time and ages of diplomacy was about to be destroyed. Why had he isolated himself from the scene—why have trusted so much to the tact of the stranger hot-head? He had taken solemn oath to prevent just such clashes. It was his duty to prevent this one. He had no time to formulate a policy—barely time to act. If only the guns did not speak before he could! If only his sudden appearance were not a split second too late!

From behind his horse he strode with steps that outlengthened Push Ahead's.

"How, my friends!" he cried with ringing geniality. "How, Push—White Leaf—every darned old scout of you, *how!*"

As he advanced, he waved his left hand forbiddingly toward Mills. The right he shot forward; with it he gripped the right arm of the chief. Over the elbow, down the wrist it slid, until it clasped in the shake of warm, friendship the withered brown one withdrawn, empty, from beneath the blanket of rank.

"Straight Talk, how!"

With the amazed return the dread moment slipped by. The advantage at least of a parley had been gained.

The venerable White Leaf shuffled forward as fast as his years would permit, that first honors, due him as head chief, might not be usurped. Cordially he greeted Quinby and grunted his satisfaction when the white hand of approval was clapped upon his shoulder.

The small ceremony had brought the two chiefs side by side, the inspector facing them. To those acquainted with the bitterness that had disturbed their relations of late, a feeling deeper than any rivalry over tribal affairs, the situation had significance.

Touching Cloud, as it happened, had been an ardent suitor for the hand of Daybreak, the Leaf's only daughter and easily the most desirable maiden of the tribe. The improvident young buck's offer of the ponies left from his extravagance had been scorned along with the girl's protestations. The lovers had been showing their grief diversely; he in intemperance, she in the pining of her docile kind. Both fathers, indignant over the unhappiness of their offspring, had declared a feud of hate which constantly threatened outbreak. Much depended upon White Leaf's attitude toward the misfortune which, as a direct consequence, had befallen his enemy.

"We are all friends together," urged Quinby genially.

The chiefs did not seem conscious of each other's existence, but held their gaze directly upon the inspector.

"Straight Talk is my friend," declared White Leaf.

"And mine," echoed Push Ahead.

"Then let me say to both of you that this is a bad business," Quinby returned with a gesture to-

ward Mills and the prisoner. "It is bad for the tribe in general and Touching Cloud in particular. You must not make it worse by hasty actions."

Push Ahead threw back his head in resentment of the reproof. "The truth is not in the mouth of Make Believe. My son has learned the laws of the land. He is not a killer; his eyes have told me so."

"Hear me, Push Ahead, and listen understandingly," Quinby urged him, for more reasons than one adopting the native tongue. "A man has been killed. Touching Cloud had been drinking fire water. He was found at the scene of the crime. These are facts. Straight Talk tells them to you and his lips speak the truth."

White Leaf grunted his agreement.

But the parent entered a protest in excited Ute: "The sign is against him—maybe so. But is that reason to send his shadow to the sand hills? The Cloud's eyes tell me that he did not kill. They could not lie to me."

"You've got to look at the matter from the outside." Quinby urged himself to plain speaking. "A man has been killed—undoubtedly murdered. The law says some one must be punished, but it will not be the Cloud unless he is guilty. It is the duty of the white deputy to take your son to jail at Circle. But none can punish him unless he is proved guilty and that can be done only after trial. Your own duty is clear as to-day's sky. There is much for you to do, but not by interfering with the way of the law. If the Cloud is not guilty, perhaps you can help us find out who is. There will be no

hasty judgment passed; that I, who talk straight, promise you."

The stolidity of Push Ahead's expression gave no hint of what impression had been made by the inspector's careful delineation of the facts—a detailed speech for him. But his reply told that more would be required.

"The white man's trial is not good," the chief declared. "Lies creep into the lodge, and the truth may not be known."

"But you have no choice, Push. Since the sign is against your son, he must be taken away to trial. To make a fight here would be the deed of a fool. Even the sand hills will not give rest to the shadow of a fool. Get the truth, I tell you, and bring it to the Cloud's trial; then the lies will all crawl out. I have said: Go forth with your young men and find who did kill Ollie Marsden. Thus you save your son as a brave would be saved."

It was much to ask of the primitive mind—to trust so vital a personal issue to the justice of the white men, so long under tribal distrust. Too much for one gulp it seemed, as the father wagged his head and replied: "The Cloud has sung his song of death. Maybe it is well. The red man finds no mercy at the trials of the white!"

Quinby realized that he must go further; he must take the chiefs into full confidence if he was to win his point. It was one of the rare occasions in his life when words seemed to have a value of their own. Fortunately his command of Ute was fluent. He rejoiced, too, in the observance that Mills evidently did not understand the difficult tongue; he

could speak freely, without fear of objection from that source.

"The Great Father at Washington has heard that you are not dwelling in peace with his white children who are your neighbors. They have complained bitterly of you. They say their horses and cattle are no longer safe to them; that your young men will not stay on the reservation; that visitors among them have been robbed and their own lives put in danger."

Uplifting a quavering hand, as though in apology for the interruption, White Leaf offered dignified denial and countercharge.

Their neighbors did not speak the truth, he declared. The depredations of which they complained had not been committed by the Utes. The whites were looking for excuses to steal upon the reservation and take the springs and the land which the government had promised the original settlers for all time. They would have him and all his people perish, with no water to drink, no corn to eat, no grass for their animals.

"That may be true of the conduct of some," Quinby admitted. " All white men are not good men any more than all waters run south. The Great Father wishes only the truth. The young man you have named Make Believe may not speak to your liking, but it is his duty to take Touching Cloud to jail until he can be tried. You chiefs, worthy and unafraid, must join with me, that I may take back the whole truth to the Great Father. I have said."

With sudden compliance, Push Ahead offered his hand. "Straight Talk is our friend. He speaks

in one way—not two ways at once. As a man who sees the snares placed in the trail, he knows how to make the step-over. It is good. I will do as he says."

"Hai-ya!"

The throaty exclamation had come from White Leaf. Rather than to Quinby, he offered his hand to the enemy whom he had not appeared to see throughout the colloquy. "We have shared hate, my brother, but regret now hurts my heart. The fault of your son in burning his discretion with the fire water is also my fault, since I took the gladness from his heart. For his sake, for the sake of all our people, let us henceworth stand together as friends. See, I am an old man and regret withers me!"

Without a word to Touching Cloud, the two chiefs walked away, their blankets touching, their heads wagging in earnest conference. Only to attach the reins of his son's pinto did Push Ahead pause; then he departed, leading the horse.

"Some powwow—what was it all about?" asked Mills, as the inspector turned to him. "I am not patient enough or linguist enough to talk down a Ute. I congratulate you, as well as myself, that you were able to divert a row, not to mention a possible bullet from my carcass in the event of my not getting him first."

Quinby offered no criticism for the ranchman's scant supply of tact, but suggested more of it for the future in his comment.

"I've carried over with some good-sized promises, which I've got every intention of keeping. One of

them was a genteel sort of entry into jail for the Cloud. You'd best see to it personal that he gets it. And say, Hutch won't be needing you around here to watch the grass grow."

Taking the hint with a good-natured laugh, Mills of the Gods began to "grind," in preparation for an immediate departure with his prisoner. The tank was soon filled and Chalmers summoned from the porch where he had been resting.

As the car chugged into the county-seat trail, the death chant of the Cloud, resumed, waved back on the wind.

> Nothing lives long
> Except the earth and mountains——

Quinby stood aside, listening and considering. He did not join in the lovelorn buck's forebodings over his ultimate fate. He had broader and therefore graver issues on his mind. Would his straight-talk "medicine" be potent to cure the epidemic of outlawry he had been sent to treat?

CHAPTER VIII

THE UNWHIPPED UTES

ON his after-dinner ride from the trading post toward Rolling Stone, Quinby had no attention to spare for appreciating the varied landscape of the Great Mesa. Not once did his eyes raise to the horizon, foreshortened by the jag-toothed ranges which nature, in some ferocious age-since convulsion, had bared. As his mount splashed through Cherry Bush Creek, he did not even see the fool's gold that burnished its sand bars, although in the days of his lesser service rank the barbaric glitter had lent light to the building of "castles in Spain." The waves of white sage, the vivid green about the springs, the rolling redtop—those successive color splotches might as well have been in monotone for all he sensed of their contrasts.

Red Bill set his own pace, an eager one, over the familiar trail and, with many a toss of the head upon his proudly arched neck, attested his relief from the draft-horse indignity that had been done him earlier in the day. But the master showed no sympathy, spoke no word of the great friendship between them. He failed even to compliment the skillful side-step with which they were carried past the strike of a diamond-headed rattler coiled in the trail, buzzing like an alarm clock.

Quinby's gaze held blindly and without conscious

focus between the ears of his mount. His mind was busy with the especially assigned task before him. He was still considering the circumstances of the murderer on Corkscrew Climb. The guilt or innocence of Touching Cloud, son of a chief, formed the subject of his mental debate. The unstolen watch, the unbroached whisky supply, the empty gas tank, the forgotten face paint, and the death song of the despairing brave—all were considered with due regard for their values.

Their values to him, however, lay not in the consummation of a single, personal tragedy, but in the prevention of many race-affecting tragedies to come. The Cloud would get justice; he would see to that. It was in the more abstract trail of two combating peoples where evidence would be difficult to obtain, where the sentence might be unjust. An intense feeling held in the flattened habitations of Circle Center as well as in the pointed wikiups of the Utes.

During his meal at the cabin among the cottonwoods, Illinoi' Hutchinson had made plainer to Quinby the gravity of the situation as weighed in the native mind.

According to the old trader's report, he would find affairs at the agency in a chaotic state and need expect no aid from Custer Revell, an appointee who, in the veteran's opinion, was "more fitten to run a chicken farm than an Injun reservation."

Illinoi' had declared that the "Seven-elevens," as the members of the Law and Order League were called, were a choice lot of blunderers, who were doing more to incite war than to establish peace.

His daughter's handsome and agreeable admirer he had pronounced a "ring-tailed pest," with a show of feeling somewhat explained by the addendum: "And the brass of him, setting up to Nona here!" The girl herself had sent their guests a covert smile which was at once an excuse for her superappreciative parent and the best recommendation yet offered for the impulsive young deputy.

Not until a chorus of childish shouts, carried to his ears on the south wind, did Quinby arouse from his brown study or realize how far he had come. He was amazed to see that he had reached trail's end, that immediately before him lay the buildings of Rolling Stone. He was, further, assailed by embarrassment when he realized that his arrival was timed with the let-out of the Indian school—the noisy outpouring of small reds told that.

The second pleasurable thrill of his day caught him—the first would always remain distinct in his memory as due to the changed appearance of her who once was known as the Brat. The school idea, then, had taken. He could not help a feeling of personal pride as he remembered the initial aversion of the Utes, very like that they felt toward vaccination, which he had overcome in persuading them to trust their precious progeny to the mental ministrations of a white schoolma'am.

That Rolling Stone had drawn a prize in the appointment of Violet Trenholm as pioneer teacher, he was even more convinced by the present demonstration in the yard than during that first term which had been the last under his direction. That she should still be waiting around, as his teasing young

friend had put it, seemed too fair a prospect to be true until he saw her in the doorway—petite, dainty, smiling of red lips and beaming of yellow-brown eyes beneath her aureole of flaxen hair.

Something within Quinby suggested that he had better ride on. But early in life he had formed a good habit about the embarrassments which frequently threatened to weaken him where women were concerned—he defied them. So now, he just grabbed off his hat and headed straight for her.

A hand over her eyes, she gave him a first long look; then she utilized both hands to wave to him. Realizing with both gladness and fright that it was too late now to turn back, he put William over the low fence that bounded the yard, dismounted, and dropped rein before her.

Her descent somewhat impeded by a couple of bronze toddlers clinging to her skirt at either side, she came down the steps. "Alec Quinby!" she exclaimed. "You look to me exactly like an answer to prayer."

"Afraid I can't qualify."

He released her hand quickly, as in other days reminded by its smallness of the size of his and puzzled as to its disposal. This time his found occupation revolving the brim of his hat.

"You'll live up to this prayer unless your inspectorship has spoiled you for helping people out," she said, flashing upward that appealing smile which made most men long to help her at any cost.

Her primary-class appendages—a bush-haired potential brave and the big-eyed makings of a squaw with blue ribbons on her incipient braids—having

conquered their primal instinct to flee the stranger white, were now using her skirt as an ambush; the male to study him with grave eyes, his sister to coquet. The picture they made helped to remind Quinby that he should express the pleasure he felt in her success; that he must not expect her to divine his approval. But it was hard, mighty hard, to say things of that sort.

"The agency school, Miss Trenholm—it sure acts like a going institution. I've got an idea what you have been up against. I—I often wondered whether it would be too much for you. But the kids look so happy and you look so happy that I am—that is, that I hope——"

In view of what he seemed in for, no wonder he stopped!

"That I hope you're happy too?" she finished for him.

It was a great relief. What had come so hard from him, had seemed so vital and bold a thing to say, had sounded easy and natural enough from her, especially as it was accompanied by a repetition of that pathetic, upthrown smile.

"They go away happy enough, the youngsters," she continued, "and they ought to come back happy, having mothers to kiss them good-by—not being orphans like big you and poor lonely me. Here their books seem to mellow them, but there is an adverse home influence lately that I've fought in vain. And most of the older boys with whom I have worked the hardest, are breaking all rules of attendance."

"There is the agent," reminded the inspector. "Why doesn't Revell send his policemen after them?"

"Revell—poor Custer! You mustn't be too hard on him. He really has tried to live up to his responsibilities, but they multiply so rapidly that I hate to shift any of mine to him."

Interruption came in the arrival of a boy of perhaps fifteen, remarkably freckled for an Indian, and a pony, drawing a travois of brush. The two toddlers, evidently his small brother and sister, deserted the teacher's skirts to meet him. Amiably enough he signified his readiness to start homeward with them as passengers, and Miss Trenholm planted them upon the drag. The boy found the back of the scrawny range animal, but in mounting exposed a suspicious bulge in the back pocket of the overalls which, with a cotton shirt, comprised his costume.

Her one hand detaining the pony, Miss Trenholm reached out with the other and drew from the pocket a war club, made of a heavy stone wrapped in buckskin and given a flexible handle of the same material —a weapon of possibiities.

"Spotty, I am surprised!" she chided the youth in an injured voice. "You, of all my boys, who are so kind to the little ones. You, after all I have said about the blessings of peace; *you,* Spotty, to arm yourself for war!"

The boy's chin drooped to a guilty rest between his collar bones, but his eyes gleamed straight down into hers, at first with a look of threat, but soon of guile. "That not for war, 'Face of the Flower,'" he explained, "for slow cayuse. You understand? Him quirt for pony when he plant his feet and

say he will not tote papooses like squaw horse. Give him back to me. Papooses hungry—must get them home."

The excuse, gliby offered, was too obvious. A blow from the weapon under discussion must have been rib-breaking and no Indian boy would dream of using it on his pony.

Quinby stood aside, interested to see what method the girl would take; this frail-looking teacher whom the small reds, born to apt nomenclature, had christened Flower Face.

Gentle and wistful with her children, as she always was with men, she stood looking at the young deceiver, shaking her head. "No, Spotty. Your tongue has twisted words to me. This war club now becomes mine. To-morrow you may come and tell me how sorry you are."

Looking like a wilted poppy, she turned and reentered the schoolhouse.

Quinby tarried a moment to watch the play of malice on the youth's face. "To-morrow I shall not tell you, for I will not come to this evil place of books and yet more books!" came from the angry lips in muttered Ute. Starting his pony with a heel kick so vicious that the answering spring almost threw the toddlers from the travois, the young scamp was off.

Quinby entered the bare little room and closed his eyes a second to accustom them to its lesser light. To his surprise, on opening them, he saw Miss Trenholm seated on the slightly raised platform at the upper end, her fair head bowed upon the desk top.

Suddenly wretched, he moved toward her, wondering what he would do if she burst into tears.

It seemed to him that she must have heard his steps; certainly she must have heard the creak of a loose board which protested that he was no lightweight. But for a long time he stood—and in total silence, although he had definitely decided three separate times that he should and would say something. Relief was his, however, when the fair face at last raised to his. There was only distress on it; no tears, thank Heaven, no tears.

"It is so disappointing," she said, a faint smile at the corners of her lips, as if there was some double meaning in her words. "One after another, everybody of whom I expect anything fails me. Alec Quinby, look in here."

She raised the lid of the desk upon a collection of primitive weapons that would have gladdened the heart of any curio collector. There were bows and arrows; daggers made of deer horns, placed in the fire until softened, then molded into sharp points; battle-axes with edges of sharpened stone; and sevéra war clubs similar to that just taken from Spotty.

"And all confiscated within a month!" she exclaimed.

The inspector forced a considerable speech for him and one designed to be reassuring. The games of Indian boys ran in cycles, just as did those of white shavers, he explained. Had she not noticed that for a time their sport would be *thaseviga*—Indian shinny? Then, for no reason at all, didn't they all at once bring out the alder poles, turkey claws, and hoops of their *nanzoch* game? What

was more natural than that they should at another time play at war?

To his disappointment, the girl did not seem impressed by his theory, especially manufactured for her relief. He wondered uneasily whether, in some occult way, she would be reading the real significance of the confiscated weapons as expressed in his thoughts.

"In addition to these," she said, "I have taken five loaded revolvers from older pupils and turned them over to the agent."

"Kids shouldn't pack guns to school, for a fact," Quinby admitted in the smoothest tones he could master. "Still, you can't expect a baby brave not to own a gun so long as there's a cash market for piñon nuts. Just so as they don't use each other as practice targets, you needn't worry, I reckon."

But from the frowning, abstracted expression with which Miss Trenholm got to her feet, lowered the lid and locked the desk, he knew that he had not been a success in his impromptu rôle of comforter.

"You'll worry, too," she declared in a sharper voice than he ever had heard from her, "if you keep your eyes open while you are on the reservation. The cheap revolvers of the half-grown boys, these homemade weapons of the youngsters have far deeper significance—something not explained by youthful braggadocio or cycles of childhood games. They tell the true story of what is going on in the wikiups morning, noon, and night. They shape the shadow of coming events, of disaster to the Indians and direful trouble to the whites. It's the situation in Rolling Stone right here and now that made me

call you an answer to prayer—the prayer of all of us for help."

"For help—from just what?"

The girl shuddered and lowered her voice. "From the unwhipped Utes," she said.

"Seems to me if you're so scared of them, you've been mighty brave to stay," Quinby observed.

"At least I'm still here." Her eyes withdrew from his. "Come over to the agency with me—hear from the Revells what you've got to conquer if any of us stay."

On their walk from the schoolhouse to the headquarters dwelling, two exclamations reiterated in Straight-talk Quinby's mind, with diverse sensations of anxiety and pleasure: "The unwhipped Utes! The brave schoolma'am!"

CHAPTER IX

MARRIED HARNESS

AS the two crossed the porch of the agency, a woman's scream split the air. What now? The question urged Inspector Quinby to throw open the front door without knocking, pause in the central hall to locate the alarming sound on its repetition, then rush toward the office, which, as he knew, had a public entrance from the yard as well as the private one to the left down the hall. He grasped the knob, found the door unlocked, and plunged inside.

But there he and the girl who had followed stopped short. Rather than the scene of physical stress which the shrieks had led them to fear, they stood looking on at some more puzzling domestic crisis.

In a chair at the desk, his slight figure slumped, his face white and seamed almost beyond Quinby's recognition, sat Custer Revell, ambitiously christened for that great general and distant relative who had ridden to his death at the hands of the Indian allies in the long-ago battle of the Little Big Horn.

Beside him, staring down at him with mouth still agape from its recent output, loomed the bulk of his good wife Annie. With one hand she waved a sheet of paper close to his face, either in nervousness or threat—it was hard to tell which.

Both turned at the intrusion, Revell to collapse

farther into the chair with a groan that could not be interpreted, his wife to utter a relieved cry and move toward the nonplused new arrivals.

"Thank Heaven, some one has come to stop Custer in his madness!" the woman cried. "Of all people, Inspector Quinby! I never was so glad to see any one in all my life. You've come just in time to lift an awful load of responsibility from my frail shoulders."

The relaxation with which she shrugged the very massive portion of her anatomy referred to and beamed across at the visiting official suggested that she considered her burden—whatever its nature—already off-shouldered.

"Madness? What has he done now?" Miss Trenholm asked.

"At your service, Mrs. Revell. What's wrong?"

With Quinby's added question he made a sudden sortie into the center of the room which he hoped would seem casual, but which, in reality, was to circumvent the obvious intention of the matron to clasp him in a ponderous embrace.

"Never before in my life have I fully realized the need of friends." Annie's outstretched hands turned upward to clasp her forehead, as she proceeded to state her case with characteristic circumlocution. "Would that the Maker had given me more strength with which to face the trials He has visited upon me. To think that I should enter the room as trustingly as a child only a moment ago to find my own husband engaged upon such a desperate deed!!"

The inspector glanced sharply toward the per-

petrator of the "desperate deed" none too plainly referred to. But that small-caliber personage sat staring gloomily at the toes of his shoes. The color, however, was returning to his face; and it was a relief to note that he had about him none of the usual implements of self-destruction.

"Glad to find you are still alive and the married harness holding, Revell." In the offer of this greeting, with his hand, Quinby carefully controlled his desire to smile.

"Your coming is welcome, inspector." Rather sullenly, the little man got to his feet, submitted to the proffered grip, then sank, as if from sheer weakness, back into his chair. "As for my being alive and married, I *know* I'm married. Never feel certain about anything else."

"Darling! Isn't he wonderful, the way he always owns up that I'm the whole world to him?" exclaimed Annie, with an enraptured glance at her spouse. "No wonder I screamed when I found him about to ruin himself."

Quinby remarked that she sure had let out a "blood-curdler."

"You see," she admitted, "I heard steps on the porch and I wanted whoever it was to come on the jump. Each second was taking a year off the end of my life. You'll never know my relief when you and dear Violet dropped out of a clear sky."

"Out of the hall, you mean," corrected literal Quinby.

"Tell us at once what is Custer's new madness and what we can do to cure it," the teacher completed.

"Why—why—it was this way," said the wife, with signs of returning excitement. "I tiptoed into the office a few minutes ago to find out what Custer was doing and, not wishing to disturb him, closed the door ever so softly. I just can't help having my girlish ways still about me and when I saw that he was writing at his desk, I decided to slip up behind him, get my hands over his eyes, and make him guess who I was. But as I was reaching out, I glanced over his shoulder and saw the madness he was at. I thought I'd die. I nearly swooned away in that awful moment."

She wabbled, as if her knees were about to deny her support, in the direction of Quinby. He executed another side-step and a stern reminder. "But you must have got strength from somewhere," he said. "That scream you let out——"

"Yes, yes," she interrupted, and nodded eagerly. "Oh, it was terrible. I like to have died! This—this!" Wildly Mrs. Revell waved the sheet of letter paper; then, sobbing incoherently, began to crumple it against her agitated heart.

At a signal from the inspector, Miss Trenholm firmly possessed herself of the apparent key to the situation, using the tactics and language she would have employed with a hysterical pupil. She passed it quickly to Quinby, who read it aloud.

"Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Washington, D. C.

"Esteemed Sir: I have fallen under the increasing burden of trying to manage the Ute Indians placed under my care three years ago.

Heaven must bear witness that I have tried as mortal man never tried before. But the culminating blow had just fallen and my hands are up. I hereby resign my post as agent at the Rolling Stone Reservation, same to take effect the moment my successor can arrive. For my sake, let it be soon. For the sake of the demented aborigines, select a man of iron for the job, one who——"

Probably the composition had broken off at the moment of the wife's scream. But Quinby did not feel the need of more detail regarding that "culminating blow" which had sent up the hands of Custer Revell. Miss Trenholm seemed not to have heard, but the news of the holdup and murder on the Corkscrew must have preceded their arrival at the agency.

"Can you believe your eyes, Mr. Quinby?" inquired Annie in a wee, small voice of pathos that went oddly with her bulk.

The inspector could, but did not say so.

"What do you think of a quitter who would cast himself out of official life just because a few pesky red men jump the traces and get themselves arrested?" the wife asked, rousing to her grievance. "Isn't he mad, I ask you—I ask you both?"

Quinby, for some reasons inclined to approve the resignation and for others, almost of equal weight, against it, declined to commit himself.

"And after all I've done, too, to help make him a figure in the world—to give him a career!"

Her reference reminded the audience, as well as

the chief, defaulting actor, of what they had heard many times—that Annie's private funds had supported the two prior to his securing the agency; that his entry into "official" life had seemed a golden chance to show her skeptical relatives just whom she had wedded; that, in her opinion, if she was willing to endure the exile from the life to which she was accustomed toward this end, he certainly ought to be.

But her reproaches, which always before had badgered her husband back into subjection to her ambitions, in this instance had roused him only to the self-abasement of the half-written resignation.

"I am not the man for the place, I tell you. Only a superman would be!"

"But the improvements he has made in their mode of life!" Annie pleaded, evidently considering Quinby's thoughtful silence a judgment. "Haven't half the families on the reservation built themselves regular houses?"

"Only to live as before in wikiups in their yards." It was he whom she was trying to "save" who objected.

"And didn't Noisy Walk purchase a fine bathtub?" she continued.

"In which money couldn't hire him to bathe!"

"And White Leaf a real brass bed?"

"To use as a fancy roost for his chickens!"

Although illuminative of reservation life under the Revell régime and amusing, if one could forget the graver issues, Quinby brought the marital exchange to an end by turning to the little schoolma'am.

"Mrs. Revell is flustered and—and all heated up," he ventured, not knowing exactly the best term for her state of nerves. "Can't you calculate something to get her mind off this husband trouble?"

Miss Trenholm was quick to get the hint and linked the matron's plump arm within hers.

"Do you promise, you lovely Alec Quinby, not to let him resign?" Annie resented the touch upon her long enough to turn her most coaxing smile backward, her personal resignation to their superior will thereby made conditional.

"Likely he won't," returned the "lovely" person, with an anything-to-be-rid-of-you manner. "It would be a surer bet, though, if we could have some of your prize pop-overs for supper. All the way from Circle my appetite has been whetting for them and nothing else."

This will be recognized as not quite straight talk. It was, however, a sort of parley frequently considered even more creditable. Before the inspector's delinquency, Custer's threatened retirement from public life backed from the forefront of her attention. With assurances that she would not disappoint him if he did not her, she floated out like some huge tug, the petite teacher trailing, for interests of her own wishing to make sure that the culinary region was their port. Since she was the star paying guest at the agency, she must necessarily be invited to the treat.

Quinby got down to business. The agent had heard about the murder. Through whom?

Angry, it seemed, had loped in with the dire tidings an hour before the arrival of the inspector.

Why was Angry sufficiently interested in the spread of the news to make such an effort? Plain enough. Although the Cloud and he claimed to be friends, he was a humble but hopeful rival for the hand of Daybreak, fairest Indian maiden and daughter of the chief. Indeed, he had looked and acted more elated over the tragedy than he should over an impersonal cause of excitement.

Quinby, remarking aloud that the ill-favored buck always looked happy, owing to his knife-cut smile, made mental and underscored note of the fact that the most notoriously lazy Ute on the reservation had suddenly become a circulating medium.

"I'd like a look at your complaint book," he said aloud.

With ill-concealed reluctance, Revell opened a drawer in his desk and produced therefrom a book bound in flexible red leather and titled in gold—a much-admired donation through the affluence of wife Annie.

Quinby lighted the pipe he had filled meantime and settled to the examination of recent entries. He found them to be of distressing array, but without variety, at least to the extent that nearly all must be classed as predatory. The Corkscrew outrage of that morning had not been the first holdup, although the first murder. The trails to the mines had become as unsafe as San Francisco alleys in Barbary Coast days. Cattle had been run off, ponies lifted, storehouses robbed. Even the minor depredations were of like initiative.

Scrutinizing dates, the inspector discovered that the crime orgy had begun about four months back.

Before that the entries were few, well spaced as to time and of a mild character. Another point that struck him was that suspicion seemed fixed in so many cases. Several instances there were where the complaintants offered proof against individual Indians—the names not recognizable as those of former trouble makers. The notations "arrested" or "held for trial" were frequent, and there had been three or four convictions.

"Humph!" was Quinby's sole comment, as he closed the book.

Revell waited, at first with some patience, through the long, trying silence. "A sorry score, isn't it?" he asked at last. "Do you wonder that this murder clap brought me to the resignation point?"

His superior did not answer either question. Instead he put several of his own. "Why do you reckon this tribe, which has been reasonably on the level in the past, has suddenly gone looting? Who planted crime for this crop of weeds—this new growth on the mesa since I've been in foreign parts? What, Revell, do you make of it?"

But helplessly, dismally, the agent shook his head.

"Don't make head or tail of it. That's why I'm resigning."

"Then get your thinking cap on pronto. Your resignation is declined."

The small man sprang up and visibly trembled. "You mean to dismiss me in disgrace? I know I haven't done much good out here, but can't you let me slip from under? For Heaven's sake—for Annie's sake, spare me the disgrace of——"

"Never was for swapping horses when crossing

a stream," interrupted the inspector, but with no tone of reverence for the suppliant's ponderous help-meet. "I'm going to take a hand in this game. You're elected for the lookout chair—to see that the deal's from the top of the deck."

A changed look—a combination of relief, inspiration, and good faith—irradiated the agent's face.

"You've given me new hope," he said.

"I will look my sharpest. If there's a man alive qualified to do it, you will beat this game of white against red."

"Did I say white against red?" For a moment Quinby scowled into his subordinate's distressed, China-blue eyes. "Say," he added, "those pop-overs ought to be ready for distribution from oven to consumer. Let's go wash up for the grub pile."

Before following from the room, Revell glanced into the wastebasket beside the desk, into which Quinby had thrown the unfinished resignation. It was torn into small bits.

His mind relieved of personal anxiety, the acknowledged failure of an agent was able to ponder the larger problem. If not white against red, what, then, was the color of the game?

CHAPTER X

A MYSTERIOUS STAKE

SO nearly hidden in the black grama grass was that stake in the ground that it must have escaped Inspector Quinby's notice had he not stopped just beside it for the purpose of breathing William. But since his eye had glimpsed it, his attention was held as if chained to it, concentrated out of all intrinsic proportion.

The unweathered state of the wood told him that it had been freshly driven. The nail head showing in its center gave it the look of a surveyor's corner post. Its particular interest to him, however, lay in its likeness to another passed not fifteen minutes before.

From his seat in the saddle, he looked around him, as if seeking in the surroundings an answer to his unspoken questions of why and wherefore. He was not altogether denied.

Just below gleamed a small, natural lake, known to the Utes as Rain Tank, the most valuable water hole within the bounds of the upland reservation. A moment's calculation convinced Quinby that the stake he had first encountered lay in a direct line to the south of the one beside which he now sat his horse. He had small doubt that if he rode due east a like distance, he would come upon a third similar post. It certainly looked as if some one had been bound-

ing a quarter section around this important water supply.

But who would be interested out here in the reservation's heart? No white man could hope to establish any claim to a foot of the land, fertile as it was, or right to an inch of the water that was always to be found in the tank, no matter how dry the season. Neither could he see how any individual Indian could benefit by a survey, for, under the government's allotment system, the soil was already apportioned and the right of all to draw upon the lake established.

From the willows fringing the tank an Indian rode bareback upon a sleek-looking horse. To him, as a possible source of information, the inspector shouted. On his nearer approach, he recognized Six Bits, a steady-going buck whose section bordered the lake.

After the usual greetings in Ute, none too cordial on the part of the native, Quinby called his attention to the marker which was puzzling him. "Who drove this stake?"

"White man with a squint gun on stilts."

"H'm-m," thought the inspector, "evidently a surveyor!" He asked aloud: "What for?"

The native shrugged his shoulders expressively. He did not know, he said. Two weeks before the man had come with several other men. They had carried stakes a-plenty and a chain of steel in addition to the "squint gun." The boss would take aim so slowly that he never could have hit anything animate. But then, he never fired; that is, the gun made no sound, although the stilts were moved many

times and squints taken in several directions. Nothing more serious than the driving of stakes resulted.

"But this land is your allotment, Six Bits," urged Quinby. "Why didn't you find out what it was all about?"

"He was a government man, so it would have been no use," said the Indian, glowering. "I could not have changed his purpose."

The inspector shook his head. No official survey party had been at work anywhere about the reservation, to his definite knowledge. He explained the impossibility of this surmise; but the Ute seemed only annoyed by his persistence.

"You go ask Noisy Walk. He rides with the squint-gun man." Thus shedding all responsibility, Six Bits jogged off on his pony.

The inspector's appetite for information was only whetted by this interview. Dismounting, he loosened the stake with some difficulty and drew it out of the ground. The fact that its point had not been treated with the usual tar preservative against decay was proof enough that it had not been driven by a government party, had he needed corroboration of his official knowledge. Placing the marker in his saddlebag, he remounted and set off at a stiff pace.

So Noisy Walk rode with the squint-gun man? The injection of this affluent Indian into the new problem brought up by the morning's chance discovery interested Quinby. He of the pedal infirmity had been a silent onlooker during that conference with the chiefs at Hutchinson's place three days before. Noisy Walk, reported to be the most ambitious suitor for the heart and hand of the diffi-

cult Miss Daybreak, hated Touching Cloud, whom the girl favored. The inspector already had decided that this tangle of native love would bear careful investigation for its possible bearing on the Corkscrew murder. Now, although the distance to the Walk's allotment was half a dozen miles, it at once became his objective.

The hours of every day since his arrival had been crowded, but with efforts unproductive of definite result. Thanks to William's going qualities, he had pretty well covered the reservation, only to deepen the complications of the broader issue. On every hand he had found evidence of the unrest so greatly to be feared in Indian diplomacy. The omnipresent distrust of the whites showed frequent signs of drastic outburst.

Much as he had done for the Rolling Stone tribe in the past, his general reception had been disappointing—either frankly cold or, what he liked the less for its deceit, pretendedly warm. On every hand he met with denial of the depredations charged and the complaint that the tribe was being persecuted. In their common wrongs, old White Leaf and Push Ahead seemed really to have buried the hatchet, and upon their joint promises to support him, whatever the crisis, he was counting much.

The murder of Ollie Marsden, with the accompanying assault and robbery of the mining man, seemed, more than at first, intricate, baffling. A regular deputy sheriff had driven out from Circle Center to report Touching Cloud safely lodged in jail and to enter formal complaint against the three other braves, of identity unknown, whom the au-

thorities wanted for murder. Custer Revell, under his superior's direction and with the aid of the two Indian policemen, had instituted a process of elimination. This had worked out to leave them nothing on which to go. Every male Ute on the agency rolls had accounted for his whereabouts on the morning of the tragedy in a way that was satisfactory if true.

Granting, for the moment, that Touching Cloud was one of the guilty quartet, where, then, were the other three? Frankly in the opinion of all concerned in the solution, the question was a poser.

If the Law and Order League was actively at work on the case, the scene thereof was not the reservation. Possibly they were waiting, as Arthur Mills had suggested they might, for the culprits to show unwonted wealth at Circle or another of the railroad towns. Again, Ollie Marsden was unpopular and Chalmers an utter stranger—possibly the law bringers would be satisfied with the conviction of Touching Cloud.

At last Quinby bore down upon the establishment of Noisy Walk—not surprisingly pretentious for a childless widower known chiefly for what to his less fortunate fellows was wealth. A semicripple from birth, Noisy was a descendant from a family of medicine man and had "practiced," with a hit-or-miss success, throughout the years of his early manhood, exercising charms and incantations after the manner of such fakers in all lands and ages. His retirement had been forced by the challenge of a rival doctor to cure his own deformity, but that had

not come about until after his fortune had been well founded.

Wits whittled sharp by years of quackery had armed him with great shrewdness in trade, so that he had grown only the more prosperous in private life. There were two flies in the amber of his happiness—despite his prosperity the tribe refused to elevate him to a subchieftaincy, and Princess Daybreak had frowned upon his ambitions in her direction.

CHAPTER XI

BREWING TROUBLE

MOST prominent in the group of buildings which the inspector now approached at a lope was the house, a square structure, peaked of roof, and painted a bright vermilion. Its well-built look suggested that white carpenters from town must have had hands in its erection, although it stood to-day without window frames or glass, its doors unhung. Beside it, the willow thatch in which the sharper really lived, looked quite primordial, as also the wikiup nearer the dry creek which sheltered the family of the improvident buck who had hired out himself, his squaw, and their numerous progeny as "help" to the "rich man."

When yet some rods away, Quinby saw that his visit need not be in vain, at least in so far as concerned his demand for explanation of the surveyor's activity. Noisy Walk was at home, seated beside a slow fire in front of his thatch. He seemed to be stirring something in a large can, and he was so absorbed that any sound from William's hoofs on the turf did not disturb him until his uninvited visitor was but a few feet away.

Then one glance was enough. With a native imprecation he sprang up, used the flowing tail of his home-undress shirt to protect his hands from the hot edges of the can, seized it off the fire, and shuffled into his wikiup therewith. His expression was

glowering on his return; the "How!" of his salutation throaty and frankly ungracious.

"I trust I am not intruding at this tea party," remarked the inspector with what sarcasm he could put into the translation. Incidentally, he did not await an invitation to dismount.

"What do you come for, now? Your policeman was here yesterday to ask me what I did on that morning when the long one killed Marsden. Do I need also to tell you, Straight Talk?"

He sat down tailor fashion and spread the folds of his shirt over his ragged trousers, for at home this dude of the open trail went very much en dishabille. His movement, however, was not quick enough to accomplish his purpose of concealment.

Made suspicious by the hasty removal of the pan from the fire, Quinby already had seen the bunched leaves and seeds of dry jimson weed upon the ground beside the Indian's original seat. That his unwilling host had been at work over some forbidden concoction was a conclusion so foregone as to require no support except from his own knowledge.

Stramonium, that form of belladonna produced from the jimson plant, had, as he knew, medicinal properties, but its benefits were not utilized by the Utes. To them it was only an accelerator, now chiefly used to add kick to the vile whisky surreptitiously peddled among them. Formerly taken straight, it had brought on, as nothing else could, the state of frenzy necessary for the success of the dances long under official ban. That Noisy should be brewing a large-sized supply of the drug was to Quinby one more sign that trouble was on its way.

But he decided in the flash of his observance to play Indian regarding it. Questions would obviously be futile, since Noisy could take refuge in the fact that he had been a medicine man, and could claim to have resumed practice. Equally futile would be the destruction of the supply in the making, since more of it could so quickly be brewed. By ignoring his discovery, he would put the retired quack off his guard and, in the event of the jimson frenzy breaking out among the tribesmen, know whom to hold responsible.

Having produced and filled his pipe in the seconds of silence, he lighted it, and drew a satisfying puff or two.

"The policemen reported your alibi all right, doctor," he said. "Of course an important citizen like you wouldn't get mixed up in a killing. But helping with a land survey, that, now, is another matter, isn't it? Who, by the way, was the white man you helped run lines around Rain Tank the other day?"

The Indian clapped his hand to his mouth, as much of a gesture of surprise as his native suppression would permit. For a moment he scowled thoughtfully; then he wagged his head in a stupid way, as if to disclaim understanding of what the inspector was talking about.

"Oh, yes you do; you know perfectly well!" Quinby contradicted, adding in a casual way: "I met up with Six Bits just now."

"Even as Noisy met up with the squint man the other day," came the belated admission. "I had ridden forth to look for a stray cayuse and stopped for a moment to watch the queer conduct of the

stranger. I do not call him friend. I did not, as Straight Talk accuses, help him."

Suddenly focusing his brilliant dark eyes on the native liar's shifty ones, Quinby drove in another prod. "You told Six Bits he was a government man."

Noisy shrugged off any importance of the charge. "Even as he himself told me. I do not know what name he wears. You go ask him."

Facing this stone wall of craft, the inspector sought some other way around than openly doubting the Indian's word, thereby allowing him refuge in anger. A change of subject seemed his likeliest course. "Mighty fine dwelling you've built," he offered.

"Fit for a fine squaw," assented Noisy, with quickly concealed gratification. "It is not well that a brave should live in it, so Noisy Walk dwells in the willows beside it and waits. The wise man learns to wait."

Quinby nodded approvingly as he got to his feet. "I hear," he suggested, "that you've bought a bathtub."

"That Custer agent, he is a fool; he talks too much. The washtub, it also is a fool—too short to permit comfortable sleep."

Moved by curiosity as to what uses the savage was making of his civilized white elephants, as well as a desire to divert his mind further from the surveying proposition, Quinby started toward the vermilion structure. The agitation with which Noisy protested the move only increased his pace.

But the Indian, despite his physical handicap, beat him to the doorway and in it took a forbidding stand.

"Straight Talk is not my friend," he said, glowering. "He is not invited to pass my door."

"Well, Noisy may be a whole lot of good things in his own estimation, but he sure is not hospitable," commented the inspector, with a laugh rather prolonged and gentle for him.

His glance about was as direct as his reply was otherwise. A gaping window near by seemed to supply the invitation lacking by the Ute. With a sudden spring he accepted, vaulted the sill, and landed squarely in the "washtub" that was a fool, being too short for a comfortable sleep. Standing beside him within it was an expensive surveying instrument.

From the doorway, Noisy Walk looked a violent death at him.

"Well, twisted tongue"—Quinby climbed out of the tub—"for a stranger no-friend-of-yours that white surveyor I was just asking about places a whole lot of confidence in you."

"You talk, but you do not think straight. You get out. The government man, he—he left the squint gun for a day or so. Maybe he will come back tomorrow, maybe the next day. It costs nothing to keep it beneath an empty roof."

Paying no attention to the wrathful explanation, Quinby lifted the instrument out of the tub and stood it upon its tripod. After unscrewing the clamps of the brass plate, he removed the transit compass, brushed the Indian out of his way, and carried the apparatus to his horse. There he bundled it into his poncho and tied it in an easy-riding position. For a moment, he busied himself scribbling on

a slip of paper torn out of his notebook, then turned to Noisy.

"When your no-friend comes back for his squint gun," he observed, "give him this receipt for it, signed by one Alexander Quinby, which aforesaid, as you know, is me. You might also point a trail to the agency. Maybe so, if he wants it enough to come for it, he will get it back."

Without so much as a second backward glance at the dour-faced bronze plutocrat who stood, with shirt flapping in the breeze, staring at the slip of paper in his hand, Quinby swung into the saddle and headed for Rolling Stone. His blood tingled with elation.

Red Bill, never slow to understand, at once got the idea of a great occasion and hit a creditable pace. His facile right ear waggled expectantly when his human partner, so seldom communicative in the words of his kind, leaned forward for a bit of confidence. "At last, old white socks—at last I know the why-for behind the troubles of the unwhipped Utes."

CHAPTER XII

THE CROOKED TRAIL

QUINBY had the choice of two trails back to the agency and decided on the longer because it led past the lodge of subchief Push Ahead. Although he believed the troubled father his ally, he appreciated the value of having any native oath of allegiance renewed at frequent intervals. Moreover, he hoped that the shrewd old fellow might be able to suggest some new line from the corner post of motivation within his saddlebag.

But he seemed predestined to diversions to-day. On rounding a bend he came upon the young buck Angry, squatted in the shade of a hackberry bush, his horse, free of bridle and saddle, standing tractably near by. At first glance, the Indian looked to be playing solitaire or some such one-man card game. But on drawing nearer the inspector was amazed to see that the bronze fingers were shuffling, not the pasteboards of chance, but crisp paper money.

Angry waved a greeting with the hand which held five bills in the fan formation of playing cards. His habitual knife-cut grin was more upcurved than usual. Apparently he was in high good humor.

"What are you holding?" Quinby asked, pleased by this change from the rule of scowls that had been offered him the last few days.

Angry's buttonlike eyes twinkled. "Aces—five of them," he said.

"Five, eh? You'd better hand the cayuse your gun if that is true and let him use it according to Hoyle. You know the penalty for five aces in a poker game?"

Did some one say that poor Lo was created without a sense of humor? Give eye and ear to Angry, a blanket Ute!

"But the cayuse does not know that I hold them, and he laid down first. Look, Straight Talk, at his hand!"

Without a chuckle, but with keen anticipation, he pointed toward something on the grass which the animal had been sniffing—five more new dollar bills spread at his forefeet.

"Where does Straight Talk advise I had best shoot the cheat?" asked Angry in all gravity of tone, but shaking with silent mirth.

The inspector, knowing the native preference for "hard" money—particularly silver dollars, although he recognizes the superior purchasing power of gold—was surprised to see the buck so elated over his collection of paper bills.

"You're birds of a feather—better let the pony off this time," he advised, speaking still in the terms of their joke. "What kind of cards do you call those?"

The Indian studied him closely a moment, as though to guard against an answer that would turn the laugh on him. Evidently reassured by the frank look of the man so widely known as "straight," he made reply: "I do not hold cards, but money."

"Money!" exclaimed the inspector. "You mean real money—good money?"

"Good, real money and for the first time used. See, it is smooth like this!"

For illustration Angry rubbed between his fingers the yellow silk handkerchief worn knotted around his neck—a particular treasure. Scrambling to his feet, he approached the horseman and held out one of the bills for inspection. In it Quinby recognized a new Federal Reserve Bank note, a form of currency which had been in circulation so short a while that his surprise over the Ute's acceptance of it increased.

Angry, however, pointed out various points of reassurance on the bill itself. "Sun picture of the Great Father"—his forefinger indicated the engraving of George Washington on the face of the note. "His excellent bird, flying with the stars and stripes" —proudly he reversed it to the national emblem, fiercely held by the American eagle. "Does Straight Talk still fear that this is not good money?"

Quinby acknowledged himself convinced and asked the source of the brand-new legal tender.

"A trader on wheels—an idiot—paid all these aces to Angry—six for his saddle, four for his bridle and blanket." He chuckled audibly as he indicated his shorn mount. "Not so bad a bargain for rotten leather."

Quinby was quick to take advantage of an opening which might let into some of the mysteries of that unfortunate occurrence on the Corkscrew Climb.

"I suppose that to-morrow the crook cayuse will wear the good leather you have at home; that Angry will lope into Circle City to purchase illustrious gifts

for the maiden Daybreak? Now that Touching Cloud pines in a cell, you should not lose your chance."

But the intimate reference seemed ill-advised. At once the Indian's manner changed to that of a bear with a sore tooth. He hitched his blanket about his shoulders, gathered up the bills on the ground, clucked to his horse, threw himself upon its bare back with the aid of its mane for purchase, and rode off without further words.

When, a few minutes after the lowly suitor's abrupt departure, Inspector Quinby reined in at the home of Push Ahead, he found no one at home but Mary Merry, the squaw. As she was an old acquaintance, he decided to pay her the respect of a brief call.

With sorrowful mien, she ushered him into the somewhat dilapidated frame white man's house that, as with other important families of the tribe, stood beside the wikiup in which they actually lived. Inside it was vividly furnished and so orderly and clean as to preclude any doubt that it was ever used for other than the most ceremonious visits.

Mary Merry's look and manner reminded Quinby forcefully that she was the mother of the recreant Cloud. Gone was the sprightliness for which always she had been remarked; gone the infectious gayety which had given her the odd name. When his most elaborate compliments over her increased plumpness and the added luster of her hair failed utterly to bring a flicker of gratification to her saffron mask of woe, he expressed directly his sympathy in the great trouble which had been visited upon her.

"Push Ahead will return by the setting of the sun," she volunteered in even-voiced Ute, by way of pronouncing the subject taboo. "With the law man he went forth two hours ago to select cayuses from our band that grazes in the long meadow."

"The law man?" Quinby knew that he was regarded as a friend and made no attempt to conceal his interest.

She studied him for several seconds; then, from somewhere about her brilliant-colored apparel, she produced a card. "This bears the law man's name," she stated, tendering it.

In the smudge-typed output of some rural print shop he read:

SPENCER W. ALBRIGHT
Honest Lawyer
Notary to all the Public
Former Justice of Peace
Member of the Four States Bar
The Ute's Best Friend
Office—Circle Center, Utah

The name Spencer W. Albright, thus so modestly proclaimed, was strange to Quinby. Evidently he was a practitioner who had moved in on the county-seat boom which had occurred since his own departure for the wider field of inspection.

Yet the card told him much of the man; his knowledge that the Indian is a born litigant, more. Had any doubt of the purpose of the "honest lawyer's" visit remained in his mind, Mrs. Mary Merry at once removed it.

"He is a great, a learned man," she said. "He only has power to set free my son from his cell."

"How many ponies does he ask to do this deed?" asked Quinby, frowning.

Vaguely the squaw shook her head. "When Push Ahead returns he will tell you. Cayuses matter not —the Cloud is everything. You will wait?"

Quinby had an honest detestation for the legal sharps who took advantage of the Ute's disposition to hire paleface advice on the least excuse. In this case Push Ahead had some reason, but it was regrettable that the Cloud's defense should be intrusted to one who felt it necessary to proclaim his honesty on his business card.

He had not a doubt that Albright was a shyster and would profiteer to the utmost of his craft upon the family misfortune. The temptation was strong to take a stand for the protection of these, his one-time wards.

In fact, so distinct was this impulse of indignation that he declared his willingness to await the chief's return. But after the mournful Mary Merry had bade him make himself at home while she prepared the sundown feast, his objection suffered readjustment.

The Cloud must needs have a lawyer when his case came to trial, and he could scarcely fare worse in the hands of Albright than of some indifferent practitioner appointed by the court. It seemed unwise for Quinby to interfere with the preliminaries or the payment of a retaining fee. If he did so, the sub-chief's blame and suspicion would fall upon him in the event of the verdict going against the brave, as

it surely would unless direct evidence in some other direction was developed. He knew that in such a crisis he would need every ounce of his influence with the tribe to hold Push Ahead and his followers within the law.

"Second thoughts are best," he said, recalling the squaw. "The ponies may have strayed and the chief be late returning. I am expected at the agency, so I will return here another day."

The Indian woman did not attempt to dispute the wisdom of this withdrawn acceptance. "It is well," she said and smiled faintly for the first time during his call—smiled as might the heart-wrung ghost of the once gay Mary Merry. Quinby left with the feeling that he was glad he had changed his mind.

He need not leave them altogether to the doubtful advices of their law man, Quinby assured himself. In due course of time he would take pains to learn just what they had decided. Certainly he meant to know more of the lawyer from Circle.

Already an enlargement of the jubilant conclusion earlier shared with Red William was taking form in his imagination—this too tentative, however, to be made as an assertion or trusted even to his best friend—his horse. His eyes, so intense and black in the tanned-over pallor of his face, were set straight ahead, but the glitter in them was not from pleasure in the late-afternoon coolness, or the swiftness of Bill's pace as contrasted with the homeward lag of the setting sun. Along the crooked trail ahead, crowded as the dust-covered, trail-side sagebrush, plainer as the light grew more vague, they were seeing signs and portents.

Earlier in the day he had declared that, pointed by a squint man's gun and given edge by the poisonous medicine brew, he had divined the motive behind the troubles of the Utes. Since then he had found an Indian playing with crisp dollar bills; had heard of a strange wagon trader who was paying them out for worn riding gear; had been informed, for the first time, of the existence of Spencer W. Albright. So that now, in the association of all these seemingly irrelated incidents, he believed he saw also the solution of the Corkscrew mystery.

CHAPTER XIII

BY FAIR MESSENGER

DUSK was falling when Quinby rode up to the agency by a back trail and dismounted before the stable. He could not hope that they had waited supper for him, but counted on Mrs. Annie's warming up something or even cooking for him afresh, so great was her show of gratitude for his refusal of Custer's resignation. His own hunger hastened the uncinching of William and an overfilling of the feed box.

As he swung out of the door of the barn on his way to the house, he almost bumped hat brims with some one who was in an equal hurry to enter—Winona Hutchinson.

The girl recovered first from the surprise encounter and backed off, bowing low. "I make way for your highness," she said in her former voice of mockery.

"Well, you better had!" he returned, his laugh sincere. "What's put the silencer on the whistle that used to announce the coming of the—the——"

In view of her coroneted height, the trig, grown-up grace of her tan corduroy habit, her conscious superiority over any situation, he could not quite speak the old name. But she, it seemed, felt no cause to stammer over it.

"The Brat," she supplemented, "has heard what happens to whistling girls and crowing hens. You

forget that she has graduated from a course guaranteed to make perfect ladies of the most woolly wild material. I had given you up, and was about to hit the home trail."

"You came to see me?"

She nodded, but her smile still taunted, and prepared him for another prod. "But don't let that stick an eagle plume in your war bonnet. I didn't come because you are almighty you, but to accommodate an intimate friend. I brought a message for you—wrote it out when you did not show at grub time and left it at the house." With a snappy salute, she started into the stable.

But Quinby had taken a dislike to the idea of her immediate departure. As she was passing him, he linked his arm in hers and faced her around.

"Come back to the house and watch me try to read your note. Unless penmanship was in that real-lady course, I'll need help. I'll give you," he promised, "half my eats."

"But, your highness and mightiness must——"

"Blanket the buts," he commanded as intolerantly as might the autocrat she kept calling him. "I'd advise you not to oppose a gink as desperately hungry as I am. I might turn cannibal and just might——"

"But at school I was taught to do unto others—you know the rest," she persisted. "If I had a pair of pussy-yellow eyes that had watched all day for a certain nice big mouse that was coming around in the evening, I'd hate to have a wild cat from the tall timber see him first."

"Same old spitfire—same claws! If you don't come along quietly," he threatened, "the mouse might

forget to be nice and take a wild bite out of the aforesaid timber cat."

In the dusk he grabbed for her, but she darted away. Both laughing, as in more youthful days, they raced toward the agency. Just outside the office door, he caught and shook her with affectionate ferocity.

"Oh, well," panted Winona, "if you're going to be a brute! If you'll let up on this calisthenic stuff, I'll deliver my message before we go in. I know I won't have much of your attention inside and—— Oh, wait a minute—I'll be good. I mean that I didn't bother with penmanship at school and can likely tell it a whole heap plainer than I wrote it. There, that's better! It's from Sandy Mills. I saw him at the party last night. The first of it is a warning. You're to keep mighty close watch for your personal safety in riding around the reservation. He has it straight that the Utes don't like your coming back at this time. Their welcome is two-faced. He has heard talk of their taking a pot shot at you."

"Hen's teeth!" exclaimed Quinby. "Of course I appreciate Mills' interest, but there isn't the slightest danger. These bucks know that I've their best interest at heart."

Winona looked him over with outward disapproval, but secret interest. Was it that the years of absence had improved her big pal's personal appearance, or that her eyes had grown up to appreciation of him? He was not so handsome as others she had met.

"I'm just telling you for what it is worth and

because Artie told me to. Bright boy, our Artie. Did you take to him?"

"Why, yes. He seems a regular scout."

So intently did Quinby peer down into her face, with a sudden seriousness which started even himself wondering, that it occurred to her for the first time to be embarrassed.

"The other matter"—hastily she changed the subject—"has to do with the trapping of the three missing reds who ought to be locked up with Touching Cloud, Sandy says. It's his own grind-out, and he's mighty hopeful of results. In examining Chalmers of Los Angeles it came out that the money of the pay roll was all in brand-new bills from the Federal Reserve Bank and——"

"You don't say!" interrupted the inspector, his mind at once reverting to Angry and those green-backed "aces" with which the buck had been playing at the trail side.

"Anyway, he—Sandy—says," the girl continued, "that the bills can be identified easily enough, and he's put the boys wise at all the Injun hangouts in Circle and down the line. He suggests that you frame up some excuse for passing a bunch of the bucks off the reservation. Pretend to have some news from the Great Father that's worth their celebrating. Artie feels sure that the thieves won't be able to resist; that they'll broach the hidden loot and can be picked up as fast as they pull a bill. Great idea, isn't it?"

Quinby did not answer. His mind had harked back to a question of his own, put to the cut-smile buck. *Was* the money good? Was Angry's tale of

having driven a fine bargain in rotten leather with the wagon trader a deep-plotted explanation of his sudden affluence? Angry, he had been told, had been the first to spread the news against Touching Cloud. Was his haste for stronger reasons than his revised hope of Daybreak—had he really been an active agent in the Corkscrew crime?

You needn't be so stingy with your praise, inspector," prodded the girl, when Quinby did not reply at once to her question regarding Mills' warning. "Our Artie's gray orbs have never lingered on the fair Flower Face, so you've nothing personal against him. I asked you whether that wasn't one great idea. I insist, *isn't it?*"

"A stem-winder," Quinby admitted. "I want to start action on it at once, so if you'll lope around by the front door, I'll meet you inside. I'll go through the office. I see Revell has struck a light."

Without waiting for her assent, he started for the side entrance. On the way, other possibilities of the connection between good money and seven-eleven enthusiasm occurred to him, but he relegated them to more leisured consideration.

Inside the office, he greeted Revell and asked whether, by any chance, he had lately issued a permit for a wagon trader to work the reservation.

The reply was as direct as the question. None such had been issued as none had been applied for.

"I heard to-day that one had gone out," the inspector explained in brief. "Start out the policemen to see if they can round him up. In case they succeed, they're to bring him to the agency at once, no matter what he says. Get me?"

"You mean that—that——" The little agent quaked with fear lest he had not got the right idea.

"Exactly," the inspector assured him. "It's just a new twist in the Corkscrew murder."

The sag of the subordinate's jaw showed that this was not what he had got at all, but fortunately his superior did not see. He was engaged unwrapping his slicker from the confiscated transit compass, retrieved from Noisy Walk's unused bathtub—the most important acquisition of his crowded day.

"Wish you'd put these in the safe," he said, handing the instrument and the wooden corner post to Custer Revell. "They're likely to be exhibits in a great big case that is framing itself. Refer all questions about them to me."

The well-intentioned incompetent could have referred several questions himself and at the moment had he dared, but to his great relief Alec Quinby opened the door and started along the carpeted hall.

From the living room Miss Trenholm's modulated voice could be heard, evidently speaking to Winona. "What has come over you, dear," she asked, "that you're so suddenly afraid to go home in the dark?"

"And what came over you, dear," the ex-Brat retorted, but in an exaggeration of the petite teacher's dulcet tones, "that you suddenly got brave enough to change your mind about deserting the school and going back East?"

"Deserting—going?"

"Yes. Don't you suppose I wormed it out of Annie Revell why your things were all packed up—books, photographs and all? You should not leave your door wide open on state secrets, darling."

"Annie told you—when I asked both of the Revells not to?"

"Well, I guess they haven't told *him*," soothed Winona. "And I won't if you keep your claws out of—— Oh!"

Both girls started to their feet as Quinby, averse to the rôle of eavesdropper forced upon him by Annie's soundless hall runner, appeared with a loud cough at the door.

Winona was, as usual, the first to regain her poise, although she looked as guilty as, when a child, he had caught her tying a tomato can to the tail of his new Irish puppy, because the dog, extolled to her as a prize setter, refused to register on seeing her caged canary.

She managed a dramatic gesture toward him, with the salute: "Behold, sweet Violet, the large and significant answer to the questions we were both asking each other. *He* has come; that is why I'm suddenly afraid, and you are suddenly not!"

Her delighted laughter was not joined by the other two. Although Quinby tried to look mystified, there was unusual intensity in the glance he sent toward her, whose petite figure, delicate coloring and book-learned conversation had excelled in his imagination the charms of the many others he had met in his travels.

He could forgive a lady quitter, the glance said, but not a lady liar. Why had the designing little orphan allowed him to pity her and to praise her for being so brave?

The conciliatory gaze returned to his made her eyes look more yellow than brown—true to Winona's

simile, yellow as those of a tame cat. And her voice, as she asked why he was so late, did sound very like the confidant, patient pur of Mrs. Tabby waiting at the hole.

Never had it been told of Inspector Alexander Quinby, even by his enemies, that he cherished an undue opinion of himself. But he did not like to think of himself as a mouse. And he would not be one—that he firmly decided in the moment succeeding the first cardiac blow of his life.

Through the supper he indulged in some of the conversation, if more of the food. It was not until the meal's end that, without seeming to, he harked back to what had been said—to what both girls were wondering whether he had overheard.

"We'd better be on our way, Nona. These nights come a-running."

"We?" exclaimed the young girl, startled into unusual brevity.

"You?" uttered the other, with what sounded to him a faint hiss in the sibilation.

"Of course," he said and rose. "That's why I coaxed Winona to share my supper. The moon won't rise for a couple of hours. Especially to-night, a dark trail is no fit traveling for a girl alone."

He started for the door as the little teacher came purring toward him.

"Why do you say 'especially to-night,' Alec? Has anything happened to—to——"

Something had; but nothing that he cared to explain.

CHAPTER XIV

THE INSPECTOR PASSES

THE hour was late, as hours go in the open country, when Inspector Quinby started back to the agency from the Hutchinsons'. The fatigue of his mount after the day's trailing had been urged as an excuse for not hastening the see-you-home ceremony, so novel in his man's-man existence, and Winona, usually so regardless a rider, had seemed rather to enjoy the leisurely pace. But, somehow, in ratio with the increase of her vivacity and of their common interests, did the importance of the dainty schoolma'am's defection in morale decrease.

Along the way they had met no one until descending into the cup of cottonwood bottom. There two blanket-coated bucks, evidently riding to home wikiups after a late call at the trading post, had passed them with an exchange of guttural greetings, but without recognition.

On the gallery of the dwelling cabin they had found old Illinoi' luxuriously puffing his pipe, after the closing of the store, in nowise disturbed over the tardiness of his offspring. Having brought her up from the cradle to take care of herself, with a good deal of assistance from her natural bent, he rested in unbounded assurance of her ability to do so. The cogent fact that she had never disappointed him yet, to his reasoning argued that she never would. In-

deed, one of his most frequent assertions was that he let trouble trouble itself.

Quinby considered it characteristic, therefore, that when the subject of Arthur Mills' worrying over the personal safety of the inspector was broached, he should blaze with vituperative scorn.

"Wouldn't that snatch off your whiskers—as we say back in good old Illinoi'," the trader had demanded. "The idea of that near-pilgrim a-warning a native growth like Alec here! Wonder he hasn't donated some instructions on how to outswap a Ute, or a bunch of advice on the raising up of my gal."

"Your utterance is inspired, parent," Winona had said teasingly. "As it happens, our Artie has some very decided ideas on that last mentioned and all-important subject. He's saving them up until——"

"You tell him to keep on saving of them, then!" the jealous father had exploded. "I've got along so far pretty darn well shy of his advice; so have you. There's no call for his horning in now as I can see."

As Red Bill now jogged the home trail, Quinby remembered the lilt of the girl's laugh as one of the few unpleasant things of the evening. That Winona's laugh should be remembered as an unpleasant thing next struck him as strange. Was he, too, jealous in a big-brother way of the evident progress toward the attainment of the Beloved Brat's hitherto cast-iron heart that was being made by the handsome young owner of the Star Square Ranch?

On the recent homeward ride, he had resented every one of her frequent references to "Sandy" and his superexcellencies. Her solo of praise and her demand that he join in and make it a duet had now

and then threatened to spoil the otherwise delightful occasion. He supposed he was just that—jealous; and why shouldn't he be of the precocious little sister he had watched grow up from jumpers?

The suitor Winona accepted would have to be acceptable to him, as well as to Illinoi', or he would know the reason why! This self-respecting assertion he nodded to the cynically leering silver man in the late-rising moon. She certainly deserved happiness and the right man if any girl did. What a mettlesome, fine creature she had developed into! How "man quick" in her intelligence, yet "woman strong" in her intuition!

A superstitious quality had entered into his growing admiration for her when, on the ride home, she had said: "I wish you'd deal me a hand on the Corkscrew crime. You used to say I played a square game. Do you know, Big Alec, I've got a hunch that the Cloud isn't guilty as charged? I had it strong even before Daybreak got to talking to me; we're great friends, the Day and I. Why don't you let me help?

"I don't play half as wild as I used to do," she continued to urge. "Fact is, I've developed such caution and sense that I'm hauling in the pots regular. Just because your ideals run to cuddly know-it-alls with yellow eyes is no reason why you should be so stand-offish with——"

"They've stopped running that direction—said ideals." His interruption had been his one acknowledgment to her that he had, indeed, overheard.

He had been grateful for her restraint in the matter of comment; just a little grip of an outstretched

hand in the gloom, with nothing said. And he had been touched by her plea that he trust her and let her try to help him. He had told her such peculiar phases of the recent crime which had come under his especial observation as he felt he could, and had been rewarded promptly by her suggestion that he meet and talk with the "lady in the case."

Daybreak's faith in her hero buck, Winona felt sure, was based upon more than sentimental feeling for him. Behind it she suspected something tangible, a definite something which the Indian girl had seemed unwilling to divulge during the formal visit of sympathy at the first chief's wikiup.

Perhaps between them they could assure the beautiful Day of their friendly coöperation; could banish her fears and gain her full confidence. It had been settled that, on the first afternoon which the inspector could spare, they should seek out the girl together.

As William eased over the ridge and into the dip toward Cherry Bush Creek, Quinby admitted to himself a deep gratification over the several ways in which his "little pal" had developed—physically, mentally, sympathetically. Even though he himself had been disappointed in the object of his love—the loveliest of Flower Faces who did not play absolutely square was not for him—he must not let it make him selfish and bitter. He must see to it that Winona did not become a victim of the same sad fate. The man to win and hold her must "show" more than good looks and affability; he must be truly "of the gods."

The only thing Quinby really had against the young ranchman was his readiness to claim credit

that had not been earned. It was cheating in a small way. Still, was not it just such small cheating in the fair, guileless-looking object of his recent affections that had this very evening blighted his admiration of her?

The man for Winona must be honest above all things. But, also, he must be keen. Was it keen in Mills to have warned a "native growth" like himself that——

There came an outside interruption to Quinby's chain of thought. From somewhere to the right of him, in the tangle of mesquite and cotton trees that fringed the creek, a rifle barked.

Next second, the thud of a bullet told him that he himself was the target of the hidden marksman and decisively answered his question about Mills. The warning had been as keen as his own scorn of it had proved dull.

For a rod or two, as Red Bill plunged forward, the rider pinched leather as no broncho had ever made him do in the "busting" arena. Instinctively he loosened his feet in the stirrups. Then, after an uncertain wabbling to right and left, he lunged from the saddle on the horse's far side, to fall, a crumpled, inanimate heap, in the middle of the dusty trail.

The vague light of midnight shafted downward. The cynical face of the man in the moon peered into that other ghastly face upturned to his curiosity.

William was not the sort of a horse to desert his man when he was down. As he felt the weight leave the saddle, he cut down his stride, planted his feet for a sliding stop, turned his head and awaited instructions. But his ears caught no signal, either

whistled or clucked; his eyes detected no movement, although his sight carried far in the moonlight.

In nervous indecision, he pawed the ground, first with one forefoot, then the other. According to all precedent of animal perception, the whole circumstance must have seemed strange. There had been a shot fired, to be sure, but the human who owned him was not afraid of a gun—often fired one himself from that very saddle. True, he had sprung forward when the sudden report broke the stillness of the night, but he was quite certain that he had not bucked in the slightest degree. Even if he had flashed his heels in protest—that would have meant nothing to his man, who rode so like a bur. Why, then, had Quinby left the saddle? Why did he lie there in the dust as if holding on?

CHAPTER XV

WILLIAM, THE FAITHFUL

RED BILL cast his eyes about him, but saw nothing suspicious, no movement at all except the slight agitation caused by the night breeze among the top branches of the trees that made up the grove. With sensitive nostrils alert, he tested the air, but detected no scent alien to the scene and hour—the pungence of sweet grass from the rolling land, the dank of marshy growths along the creek, the woody smell from the grove, where were congregated cherry bush, gnarled mesquite and taller cottonwoods.

Moved to investigate, Bill returned with cautious step; his eyes active to detect any untoward move; his ears shifting to gather in the slightest sound; his nostrils quivering for any odors that did not belong.

When within nosing reach, he lowered his shapely head and circled slowly about his fallen pal, sniffing discriminatingly. To the best of his observance, not a muscle quivered of the inert mass that had been so very much alive but a moment before. Yet there was about him no suggestion of that distasteful reek of fresh blood, nor of that raw other odor associated in his mind with a more temporary form of oblivion.

Fearsomely the cold muzzle sought the head lying hatless in the dust of the trail, pressed so close as almost to touch the face turned toward the grove,

whence the gun report had come. No breath issued through the open lips.

Refusing to believe the worst, William waited, listened, looked. And at last he was rewarded. Faintly warm, but as refreshing as a cañon breeze in the joy of it brought, even respiration began to fan the velvet of his nose.

As if he saw it all, Bill sprang back. And that his man might understand that he also understood the game, he threw up his head and vented a long, vibrant whinny of exultation. The idea of trying to fool a nose like his!

But no exultation was in the first sound emitted from Alec Quinby; it was more of a groan. In truth, though, it was not a groan from pain, since he had not been struck by the bullet which had come so unexpectedly out of the night, nor even bruised by his fall from the saddle. The lead had hit the horn of his saddle just under the leather wristlet of his rein hand which had been resting there; his fall had been calculated.

His artifice, however, had gone for naught. All the while he had lain in the trail, as dead, to all appearances, as he wished his hidden enemy to believe him, his eyes had been searching the grove, his gun ready for the first sign of his assailant. Through faithfulness, unwelcome for the first time in their many adventures together, urged by love and instinct, William had foiled his plan. As plainly as if shouted in words of Ute or English, the whinny had informed all within hearing that his rider was playing possum.

The sorrel's devotion, however, was not entirely without compensation. Even as the inspector gave

consideration to his next move, which must be quick unless he wished to be the target for a second pot shot, the horse call was answered in kind and in duet. Distinctly, from an arroyo which cut in at the lower end of the grove, there issued a double equine response.

To Quinby this told much—that there were at least two riders involved in the ambush, possibly the blanket pair whom he and Winona had passed on dipping into the cup; that they had not yet returned to their horses, else they would have choked off any answer to William; that probably they were still concealed among the trees and thereby held the advantage over him.

He lunged to his feet. One spring brought him to the side of his mount. He swung to the saddle and instantly slumped into a protected position along the animal's far side. For only a second or two had he presented himself as a target, but long enough to draw fire. The bullet went wild, but only by a hissing margin.

He started William skirting the grove in the direction of the waiting horses, meantime returning the shot from under the arch of the sorrel's neck, clinging to the saddle horn with his left hand. His attempt was only to impress caution on the ambush party, for he had no chance to aim.

A dozen forward lunges brought them into the low, wild-cherry bushes which fringed the grove and gave the creek its name. There Quinby again relinquished both saddle and mane holds for a second calculated fall. This time, William, being a horse who

could learn a thing or two, heeded his muttered command and thundered on toward the arroyo.

Flat upon his stomach, the inspector began a snake-like wriggle over the loam toward the larger trees and the semiopen of the grove. Even an Apache, most serpentine of braves, might have envied such rapid and noiseless progress. Not a dry twig snapped, not a bush waved unwontedly, as the white moved forward with all the skill and caution learned in his range-lived boyhood; with every sense keen to sight or sound that might betray the whereabouts of his assailants.

As he gained the grove and was about to straighten close to the trunk of a gnarled mesquite, he suddenly flushed a man from the cover of the next tree. Why this ambushed person at once took to his heels instead of firing, when he had such point-blank range, Quinby did not stop to consider, any more than to count the danger of exposing himself to the aim of the probable second miscreant. At once, he started after the visible unit of the quarry.

As the chase wound in and out among the trees, several emergency conclusions decided him against chancing a shot in the uncertain light at a target who evidently knew all the tricks of dodging. One was that the ambush had not been designed to kill, but only to frighten him. Their initial shots having failed, the hide-outs did not wish to risk recognition in the possible failure of a battle at close quarters and now sought only to escape.

There was another possibility, and that was that their attempt was murderous and this subsequent development part of a trap to finish him. He would

get them before the trap could be sprung. The angry desire to come to grips with the man ahead, as well as a disinclination to kill unless it was absolutely necessary, withheld his fire.

At least every other one of the puffs which the violent exercise afoot sent through his lips was in self-congratulation that he was gaining on his quarry. Once, when the man tripped over a creeping vine, an added spring brought him near enough to seize the blanketed shoulders. But the next sound his near-captive wriggled free, leaving in his clutch nothing but the native garment.

Tossing this aside, Quinby spurted, and again gained contact as the other attempted to dodge and double around the trunk of a cottonwood. This time there was no blanket from under which to squirm. He threw his full weight into the tackle and his grip sank into human flesh. A wrench with all his strength, a gasp of ferocious resistance, and his quarry was downed.

Even as he bent for the near-to-earth battle that was to complete his victory, the man in his grasp relaxed, ceased to resist. Concluding that his head must have struck against a stone or projecting root, Quinby rose to his knees and glanced around for the possible appearance of the second enemy. But he saw nothing in the leaf-shaded light of the moon; nothing but the tree trunks stationed about like specter sentinels.

A sound—or was it a sound?—caused him to glance up. The foliage was thick overhead and presented an impenetrable blackness. Just without the circumference of tree shade gleamed a patch of un-

obstructed moonlight. He leaned over his lax captive and started to drag him into this light in the hope of recognition. As his hands groped for the likeliest purchase, the long braids of hair worn so proudly by all the Rolling Stone Utes, he made an astonishing discovery: His blanketed assailant had been to a barber; he was shorn of the tribal glory!

More impatient than before to see clearly his victim's features, Quinby caught him by the well-muscled shoulders and jerked him outside the margin of gloom. With clutch unrelaxed against possible trick, he started to turn the man over.

What struck him he did not know. Landing between his shoulders, something crushed him down over the body he had been about to examine, drove his own face into the earth around a decaying stump. Then something else landed on the back of his neck and he knew no more.

CHAPTER XVI

THE COUNTED COUP

IT was sunlight that awakened Alec Quinby—awakened him to an ache worse than that of his throbbing head. From the slant of Old Sol, away off there in the eastern sky, he had been engaged for two full hours understudying an alarm clock. But, at that, the object of his resentful, choleric glances did not at once arise.

It was not that the bed in which the inspector found himself was so soft, for the curly buffalo grass of the trailside was anything but luxurious. It was not that he wanted further repose, for his limbs were not relaxed, but stiff and chill. Nor had he rolled over for that "last wink," so much more valued than those of the whole long night. On opening his eyes and realizing his surroundings, he wanted nothing less than continued sleep.

The reason why he did not arise at once was so material that it hurt. The ropes which bound him were cutting vigorously into his wrists and anklets.

A vagrant memory of the last time he had depended upon other than his subconscious self to awaken him, chanced to mind. That night he had spent in one of Salt Lake City's skyscraping hotels on his way to the reservation. From the pandemonium of noises which had tortured his ears—clang of trolleys, honk of automobiles, jangle of metropoli-

tan alarms—the ring of his room telephone had failed to make an impression. A bell hop hammering his portal at last had aroused him to a perception that the joke was on him. Under the door had been slipped a card bearing an inscription in paraphrase so irritating to a traveler who has missed his train: "Many are called, but few get up!"

This early morning, he seemed delayed by a joke of some more grim sort. Into his realization came more recent memories; of a shot from ambush; of the failure of his possum play; of a chase through the grove that had ended in the snap of a trap and unconsciousness. And here he was most effectively trussed with the sort of hair rope ordinarily used for the hog-tyin' of obstreperous quadrupeds.

"Especially to-night"—was not that the ambiguous expression he had used to the little schoolma'am just before departing from the agency with Winona? Well, he had spoken more to the point than he had dreamed at the time; it had been, in more ways than one, a very special night! He had not given heed to that superkeen, very timely warning of the young ranchman, Sandy Mills, any more than he had answered Miss Trenholm's soft-purred query. What sweet revenge would be offered the two, could they see him now!

With a mighty effort that brought protest from a dozen nerve centers, he gained a sitting position and, with it, fuller knowledge of a situation which added the ache of a chagrin to that of his joints. His wrists were tied and his fingers laced to either side of a flat piece of bark, precluding their use against knots. His ankles were hoppled and, leading from

them, a rope tied him to a picket pin imbedded in the ground.

"Staked out to grass like a scatter-brained horse!" The disgust in his out-loud voice added reproach for the overconfidence in his own prowess which was responsible for his plight.

Just beyond his boots, his eyes chanced upon something that completed his humiliation. It was a design worked out in fresh-cut cherry twigs and laid upon the ground in an arrangement which he knew only too well as the Ute's sign of triumph. His assailants, after felling him by some unseen force, had "counted coup" upon him, to his everlasting disgrace in Indian eyes if authoritative word of it reached their ears.

And there, just before him, lay the main trail through the reservation, from which all who ran might read! If a shred of influence with the reds was to be retained, he must not be found in such a state.

Thus urged, he gave serious consideration to the loosening of his bonds. He strained at the knots, accomplishing nothing but pain. It was evident that expert hands had attended the trussing; his fingers were literally wooden.

Quinby decided to drag himself back into the cover of the brush in the hope of lying concealed until he could attract the attention of some passing white man. Hope raised in his breast at the progress made, only to be strangled when he reached the end of the picket rope. Like an animal at bay, he turned savagely, attacking it with a snarl and his teeth; but the rope might have been of twisted steel for all the

impression made upon it by his molars. The tightly woven hair of it seemed to sear his lips and tongue.

He was wriggling back toward the iron picket pin, in the hope of some way dislodging it and making possible his drag-away, when there came the first cheering sound of the morning. His ears could not mistake the timber of that whinny; Red William, though not in sight, was somewhere near. Moistening his dry lips, he shrilled a whistle of command. Instantly the whinny answered, this time a request for direction. At his reiterated reply, the rangy sorrel came trotting over the knoll.

Quinby felt no surprise that the braves who had counted coup on him had not taken his horse. Bill was too celebrated to be the object of a profitable "rustle," even were it possible for strangers to get a string around his wily neck. They had been content, doubtless, with stampeding him toward the open range, from which he had proceeded to work his way back in search of his strange-behaving rider.

Anyway, his best friend was at hand and could be counted on to give aid to the limit of his intelligence. There could be no doubt that Bill was delighted over the reunion, when his horse laugh told that he had sighted the lowly heap. Playfully, then more urgently, he began with his cold muzzle nudging his master to arise.

Quinby found it difficult to make the horse understand what was desired of him. He first tried to get Bill to take the picket rope between his teeth and pull out the pin, a feat beyond his own manacled ability.

But the equine instinct of self-preservation was stronger than his will to serve in this new emer-

gency. This animal had suffered from rope; detested it as the shackle that first had brought him under subjection to man; feared it as he did nothing else short of death blood. He would have none of the proffered mouthful. Equally futile were the inspector's clumsy efforts to get the hind hoofs entangled in the hope that Bill would then kick the pin loose.

As a last resort, he succeeded in getting the long tail twisted about the splint which held his hands. On command, Bill began a slow walk-away. The tail lengthened, Quinby's body straightened and his ankles took up the strain upon the picket rope.

But after an agonizing interval, he realized as never before the truth of the axiom that a chain is not stronger than its weakest link. He was that link. He could not endure the strain. Bill seemed glad enough to give up the incomprehensible proceeding when his pal, having suffered to the utmost, called off the attempt, even assisting with his teeth to save the proud sorrel banner as many hairs as possible.

Humph! ran Quinby's conclusions. It certainly began to look as if he were staked out for fair; as if his chances were slim of escaping the native contempt that would be so costly to his mission. He nursed a faint hope that Custer Revell might happen along from the agency, or that old Illinoi' from the trading post might ride past before any of the Utes. But he could not count on such good fortune, especially as the coup counters would probably find some way, without exposing themselves, of sending a band of braves over the trail to discover his ignominious plight.

His head, aching with these problems, as well as physical pain, had dropped to his splint-held hands, when William himself unwittingly offered a solution. One of his accomplishments, encouraged by Quinby on many an idle afternoon of agency days, was shaking hands. The sight of his master in such evident misery must have moved him to this attempt at diversion.

At any rate, his forefoot was raised and offered insistently for the shake which, in common courtesy from man to horse, was always returned. Grateful for his sympathy, Quinby made a valiant effort to respond. In so doing, the sharp toe calk of the sorrel's new shoe caught in the rope that bound his wrists.

"We've got it!" cried he with sudden inspiration. "Hold fast, old socks, for the longest handshake on record!"

William was puzzled, but, on the whole, pleased by this return to animation. Evidently he thought some new kind of game was being taught him and took the cue of its exact nature from his instructor's ejaculations of encouragement or disapproval. It never took him long to get an idea, and soon he held out first one forefoot and then the other as rigidly as he could, while Quinby sawed the ropes against the sharp iron. He did not mind, his sniffs and horse laughs gave assurance, if the rather foolish new game diverted his pal.

Hair by hair, the rope was severed; the strands about the splint fell away. Once Quinby's fingers were free and unlimbered, he made short work of the knots that hoppled his ankles. And his first

move, on regaining the use of his feet, was to kick to the several points of the compass the cherry-bush sign of the counted coup.

He went to the creek, William in trailing attendance, drank deeply of the chilled water and removed from his person, as best he could, the traces of his recent plight.

With a command to the horse to wait, he strode into the grove, curious to retrace the trail which had taught him anew the lesson of overconfidence. It looked so different in broad day from what it had in shadow-slashed moonlight that not until he came upon the covering snatched from the come-on brave's shoulders did he feel at all certain that he was on the right course.

The blanket still hung over the cherry bush upon which he had flung it—a new, blue-gray one, with a design in red. A moment's close examination brought disappointment. In the Germantown yarn and unmistakably metallic color of aniline dyes, he recognized a common-grade or store blanket, of the sort sold by the pound. It would be more difficult of identification than had it been of the genuine, "extra-fancy" wool which the Utes prized so highly that many a man of them was known by his blanket as well as by his horse.

From the bush, he had no difficulty in tracing his precipitate course to the cottonwood which had marked the finish. There was the root on which his quarry must have tapped his head. There the decaying stump into the dank earth, about which his face had been jammed by that crushing weight dropped upon his shoulders from above.

He turned and examined the cottonwood, finding unmistakable traces in the scarred bark that it recently had been climbed—and by feet not incased in moccasins. Any doubt about the nature of that crushing weight fled. Up there directly over his head swung the limb from which the second of his assailants had dropped, like a mountain cat, upon his unsuspecting back.

It had, then, been the trap which he had half feared, but counted himself speedy enough and strong enough to avoid. A trap set with native cunning and sprung with savage force. But wait! "Native." "Savage." The words challenged him.

One of the ambush had worn a store blanket over his shoulders, the other the shoes of civilization. What was even more worthy of note—he remembered distinctly now—the one he had tackled was short-haired. There was, of course, that significant sign of the counted coup, and yet——

He returned to Red Bill, mounted and rode off toward the agency. The thought of breakfast had become of primal importance. But one thing he decided while on the way. The attack on himself should not be the subject of any special investigation. The stain of that counted coup must be wiped out, for a certainty; but that could be done on the general clean-up day scheduled in his very near future.

CHAPTER XVII

UNWELCOME SUSPICIONS

THE inspector had lost all track of the time in his struggle to free himself from his horsehair bonds. This he realized when, to one side of the trail ahead, he saw Miss Trenholm approaching on foot. It must be nearly nine o'clock, and she headed for the schoolhouse. A strong disinclination to meet her alone made him look to right and left. Had he foreseen the possibility, he would have approached the agency and breakfast by a less hazardous route.

The next moment, he took himself in hand after that very good habit he had formed. Was he turning coward as well as bufflehead? As usual in such moments of panic, he rode straight toward the object he longed to shun.

On recognizing him, the teacher hurried forward, as tender-eyed and kind-lipped a welcome back to life as man could ask to see.

"Thank Heaven, you are safe!" she said from her mid-road stand, in the vibrant voice of feeling and sincerity.

"Safe? I'm as safe as a camp meeting," he answered her as easily as he could.

"But you did not come home. You—you were out all night," she stammered.

"Inspecting things, both general and particular, don't lend to regular hours."

"But why didn't you say you were going to stay out before you left? I was so worried; we all were. You see I got to thinking about what you said on leaving: 'Especially to-night'—it haunted me. There seemed to be some terrible reason why you did not answer my question when I asked you what you meant. Custer kept saying that you must have stayed over at the post. But I could not believe, even at the time, that you'd gone out just to see Winona Hutchinson home;—she traipses the range at all hours—is really more like a man than a girl."

"Think so?" Quinby inquired.

Perhaps the little, soft-hued teacher heard the quiet hostility of his tone, for she passed the question in continued reproach: "You shouldn't, really, have put your friends under such tension!"

"Unavoidably detained," he muttered, wondering how polished gentlemen ended such interviews.

With dismay he saw her flutter nearer, heard her cry of alarm: "Your poor face! You've been in a fight—been attacked?"

Uneasily Quinby lifted his hand and felt a few bumps and scratches not washed off by the laving of Cherry Bush Creek.

"I did have a—a fall from my horse," he conceded.

"A fall from your horse—you, the best rider in four States! You look all used up. Your lip has been bleeding. Your hat is gone."

The inspector replied with only a shrug of regret for the sombrero that probably was lying where he had dropped it in that futile possum dive from the

saddle, but he grinned dubiously at her word picture of his appearance.

"I admit there was a little discussion, but hopple your fears, I'm all right now."

"A discussion? Oh, Alec, tell me! It was not with—with old man Hutchinson?"

"Why the jagged jasper should it be with him?"

The inspector straightened in the saddle, for the first time interested in the enforced encounter. As she, in turn, looked too confused to answer, he sprang from his horse and stepped forward to confront her.

"Hen's teeth!" he exclaimed. "Don't you know that Illinoi' is one of my best and oldest friends? What put such a loco idea into your head?"

Her eyes lifted to the demand, no longer tender brown, but hard and light as topaz in the strong sunlight. "You almost make me hope that—that——"

"That what?"

"That what Annie and Custer feared isn't true; that Hutchinson didn't have reason to resent your presence at the post so late."

As Quinby's mind opened to the suggestion back of her words, so carefully blamed upon the agency couple, a red flare of honest anger—not so much for himself as another whom he respected even more—blotted out the pallor and the scars, even the blood-stains on his face.

"Say, you've got my leave to hope on," he said, "but don't you mention anything of that caliber to me again or—or—well, you just might be sorry."

She caught his arm, despite his effort to avoid her

touch. "You mustn't jump at conclusions, Alec," she begged. "You don't understand all I mean. As I lay awake last night, wondering and worrying about you, I did some heavy thinking about all the trouble out here on the reservation that has brought you back to—to us. Some person or group of persons is back of it all and I tried to center upon the likeliest to profit by it. It seemed to me that the finger of suspicion points straight at that old profiteer of a trader. Who else has such opportunity to dispose of the loot of the Utes?"

For a moment Quinby stood speechless under amazement over this outrageous deduction, but only for a moment.

His reply was quick, intolerant: "Enough of that, young woman. Illinoi' is a white man if ever one lived, and my friend to boot. I warn you again, if you're given to such suspicions, keep them to yourself!"

But Miss Trenholm had a temerity this morning that contrasted oddly with her frail build and flower face. She even seized William's rein when Quinby turned as if to remount.

"One can be disappointed in one's friends, inspector," she said. "I guess we've all learned that to our sorrow. The look of you this morning makes me more than ever convinced that—— Oh, hear me out! This is just between ourselves, I promise. And I have your own best interests at heart. I've said nothing and will say nothing to any one else. Who would be interested in making trouble for you, since I imagine you'll grant that the Utes would scarcely dare attack of their own accord? Why, the man

who is behind them, whose punishment is threatened by your activity. From the beginning of intrigue, hasn't some woman been the favorite lure of unscrupulous men? Some have used their sweethearts, their wives, their own daughters, to bring about their ends.

"Who waited here yesterday, nervous and uncertain, for your return?" she hurried on. "Who pretended a timidity, ridiculous in one of her upbringing, to lure you away into the night on an unnecessary ride? Who got you to stay late at her home? And from that ride you return all beaten up—a victor in the battle, to be sure, but only because fortune favored you, or those who attacked you overestimated their strength. Open your eyes, you clever blind man! Don't be taken in by an old miser and his pretty, half-wild——"

"I'll be sloping along, Miss Trenholm," Quinby interrupted fiercely. "See that you remember your promise to keep a tight lip on the things you seem determined to think of——"

As before, he thought better of finishing in exact terms of penalty, but he made no attempt to look any pleasanter than he felt as he sprang into the saddle.

"Ride on," she flung after him, evidently angry herself. "Ride on to the agency and meet the first proof of what I've been telling you! Another friend of your paragon trader is there; I haven't a doubt his full partner in crimes."

"Illinoi's pardner?"

With rein lowered, Quinby paused for further information. The petite creature in the road, who had

so long concealed her real nature from him, laughed with frank spite that she had at last awakened his active curiosity.

"Yes. Custer has interesting early callers, so Annie told me as we were breakfasting alone. They're still waiting for you. The most important visitor is a lawyer, or so Annie said. He intends to give you a lively moment, to judge by certain of his remarks which penetrated from the office into the hall as I passed through."

"A lawyer—what lawyer?"

This time it was the turn of Flower Face not to answer him. With a repetition of that taunting laugh and a dainty wave of the hand in farewell, she, after all his hurry, was the one to end the interview.

The inspector did not further press her; rather, he pressed the speed of William toward the agency. The while, flying thoughts breezed with him.

He did not like her kind of thoughts. He never could get women, anyhow, the way they play-acted along, true to some ideal rôle, for the applause of a one-man audience, then suddenly threw it up for an unashamed interval of acting themselves. It would have been really impossible for him, the merest of men, to have got such a clever contradiction as she, unless he had been given a straight tip—and from her own lips. Such a small thing it had been in a way, her acknowledgment to Winona that she had asked the Revells to conceal from him her intention of deserting the school in mid-term, yet it meant much.

He could imagine the way she would go through domestic life; her evidently natural capacity for de-

ceit growing with the years. So far as concerned her suspicions and insinuations of to-day against old Illinoi', as well as the Beloved Brat—they were too absurd to be worth a moment's consideration.

Always had he been mighty pleased with the sobriquet the Utes had pinned on him, like some hardy, fragrant cactus flower. The woman to whom he intrusted his good faith for life—well, she would have to be Mrs. Straight Talk, that was all!

With a spurt of eagerness to be home again, William rushed the last few rods of the trail and pulled up gallantly. Quinby tossed the rein to the Indian chore boy, with an admonition to "feed him plenty;" then went directly to the office door and entered forthwith.

The group inside started up in surprise at his sudden, unceremonious appearance. But none were as surprised as he when Custer Revell presented the name of the lawyer foretold by Miss Trenholm.

So Spencer W. Albright proclaimed himself an intimate of Illinoi' Hutchinson, as well as "the Utes' best friend!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AN UPROOTED PLANT

QUINBY had a fixed look for the author of the elaborate, printed card shown him by the sad Mary Merry, who now presented himself with such cordiality.

When his eyes moved on to the stolid face of Six Bits, he of the Rain Tank allotment, a thought of the stolen survey flashed through his mind, introducing the possibility that Albright might have come representing the owner of the confiscated transit. And the white stranger—thin-faced, sharp-nosed, scowling, who sat so nervously on the edge of a chair—could this be the surveyor who he had scarcely dared hope would show himself, to present the receipt given to Noisy Walk?

The presence of the two agency policemen, however, seated with self-important pose on either side of the door through which he had entered so hurriedly, caused a readjustment of that surmise.

He returned to a study of the lawyer—a middle-aged man, encumbered with the considerable avoirdupois thereof, bald to an extreme degree, and dressed with nicety foreign to their Southwest.

"What can I do for you, Albright?" Quinby asked.

"Are you—you aren't really the Indian inspector?" Albright raised his brows with the protest.

Thus reminded of the appearance of a near-cas-

ualty, which had evoked the unwelcome sympathies of the little schoolma'am, Quinby smoothed back his hair and signaled Revell. The agent reasserted his superior's identity.

"Well, you must excuse me for remarking that you don't look the part."

"Don't mind excusing you—once," said Quinby with point. "What brings you?"

Albright threw out the chest incased in a figured waistcoat, placed one hand upon a rotund hip, and assumed an oratorical pose. "I am here to protest an outrage," he began, "perpetrated by your command, so I'm told, upon a respectable fellow citizen and good client of mine—Mr. Garry Todd, of Circle Center." He gestured toward the sharp-nosed man. "Mr. Todd finds himself arrested by your blue-suited minions and forced to come miles out of his way to this agency against his will and at a heavy cost of his valuable time—all this over my protest. We asked the charge against him, but the Injun cops don't know. 'The inspector say bring wagon trader in,' is all the explanation they have for the outrage. Since when has this reservation been closed to reputable white travel, I want to know? By what right do you interfere with honest trade and barter? Memories of Magna Charta! Does a merchant have to carry a sheaf of sued-in-advance habeas-corpus writs before he is free to transact his business on Rolling Stone?"

Quinby was not surprised by the man's manner, which had been forecast in that flagrantly unprofessional card; but he could not reconcile himself to the intimacy reputed to exist between Albright and

Illinoi' Hutchinson. That a foursquare man like the old trader could have anything in common with this pompous, shifty-eyed shyster was incomprehensible.

"I'm asking you!" the lawyer prodded.

"So you are," returned Quinby, deliberately finding himself a seat by throwing one long leg over the corner of Revell's flat-topped desk. "No; h. c. writs wouldn't be of use out here; but a trading permit would."

"Trading permit!" The lawyer sniffed his scorn. "That regulation has been dead and buried for years."

"Resurrected and very much alive, then. If you don't believe me, ask your client." Quinby turned to the Indian policemen. "Where did you make the arrest, boys?"

It seemed that Mr. Garry Todd of Circle Center had been found encamped alongside Six Bits' wikiup the night before, too late for the trip back to the agency. He had made no fight, except with the fire and sword of words. As they were passing Push Ahead's that morning, they had met the "law man," who had talked a very great deal more. On finding them deaf, as they had been ordered to be, he had ridden along with them.

Quinby's eyes flashed back, intense and questioning, to the lawyer.

"I was out to consult Push Ahead on professional matters," the latter gave account of himself. "I spent the night there and was starting for my good friend Hutchinson's place when this small cavalcade appeared. Finding one of my regular clients in diffi-

culty, I naturally joined the procession, to see that he got justice if there's any to be had. I must say, inspector——"

"But wait a minute; I must say a thing or two," checked Quinby. Switching to Ute, he addressed Six Bits: "You're not under arrest; how come you here?"

The Indian stalked closer and from beneath his blanket drew a fistful of bills, crumpled by his clutch, but obviously new.

"I come to ask the agent about these," he said. "They look like money, they feel like money, but are they money? I never saw any so clean before. I received them from him——" He shrugged a shoulder toward the prisoner—"for six blankets my squaw has made. Charley Horse, my neighbor and friend, also received many like them for his pinto. When the policemen came and took him away, I fear that I am fooled, so I come, too."

Quinby took one of the bills and examined it, finding it to be, as in the case of Angry, a Federal Reserve bank note. His smile was not so much for the Indian's reassurance as indicative of his own satisfaction.

"This is real money—good money," he said.

"But Straight talk knows well that good money is used many times," the buck protested. "These bills—see, they are so clean they must never have been used!"

"Nevertheless they're all right, Six Bits. Sit you down on the bench and we'll make talk about them later."

As the Ute, with a grunt of relief, shuffled toward

the seat indicated, Albright reasserted himself. "Well, what about it—what about it?"

"What about what?" Quinby shook himself, as if forcefully startled from some abstraction.

"Are white men to be kept waiting, I want to know, while you palaver with blanket bucks?"

Despite the impatience of the question, the man addressed was a long time answering—in fact, never answered it. Reaching into his pocket, he produced a printed card and sat frowning down at it.

"I see you call yourself 'the Utes' best friend,'" he remarked at last.

Albright bowed. "I am so known, sir, and I don't find it necessary to feed them candy to make them believe it, either. I am glad to see that you already know my reputation and have possessed yourself of my card and address. The defense of Touching Cloud, grievously accused, has just been intrusted to me as further proof of the native confidence. But at this moment, inspector, I represent Mr. Garry Todd. I reiterate, what about him?"

"Let's hear what he has to say for himself," suggested Quinby.

The wagon trader's approach, in response to his attorney's signal, was as reluctant as his information under questions shortly proved to be; his whole manner inspired anything but confidence.

"I am an honest man; I'll say that for myself at the start," he began. "I ain't been arrested before—never. What say? No; I'm not long in the country and didn't know about getting a permit just to trade a little with the Reds. Why, I just came out to drive around in the open a few days for my

health. No; I ain't been well, and my old woman was sure she could run the store down in Circle. The doctor said for me to forget business—said that just roaming around out o' doors would do me a sight of good."

"You seem to have been right busy at that." The inspector could not resist the barbed comment.

Todd looked abashed at his slip, then uneasy, then suave. "You can't throw off what's born in you like you do an old coat. I reckon I'd as soon overlook an insult as a chance at a bargain. That is"—he sent a doubtful glance toward his lawyer—"you mustn't get the idea that I was sharping the Indians. I just picked up a horse and riding leather and a few blankets at a fair price all around. Live and let live; that's my motto! And I pay cash, too. I'll show you."

He drew out a wallet and exhibited a supply of bank notes, most of which, Quinby noticed with increasing complacency, looked brand-new.

"Let's see," the official figured aloud. "You bought the horse from Charley, the blankets from Six Bits here, and the riding leather——?"

"Saddle and bridle from a buck with a scarred face that I met on the trail," supplied the trader. "That's all the business I've been well enough to do so far."

"And all you'll be well enough to do this month."

At Quinby's chuckled comment, the legal sharp flared again into belligerency. "What? You're going to interfere with this gentleman's pursuit of trade? You won't issue him a permit?"

"Mr. Todd's principal business on this expedition

is regaining his health, isn't it? He said that himself. It suits me better for him to do it on some other range, where there aren't so many pickable bargains."

From this final decision the inspector was not to be moved, although the lawyer made a further effort to earn his fee. The day of lax administration had passed so far as the Rolling Stone reservation was concerned, Quinby declared. For thirty days, trade thereon was forbidden one Garry Todd. If he cared after that interim to apply to Agent Revell, a permit might be issued him. He closed the case by instructing one of the policemen to escort the invalid beyond the reservation line. The lawyer, still puffing protest, followed his client from the office.

"You'd think there'd been a run on some Federal Reserve bank—all this new paper cash floating around in a land of hard money," mused Quinby, doing a turn around the room as he pondered the problem. "Strange how the cleanest currency can be used for the dirtiest purpose!"

To him the health drive of the wagon trader had every appearance of a deliberate plant. Four painted braves were advertised to have committed the Corkscrew holdup and murder. Touching Cloud was in jail, tied in the hard knots of circumstantial evidence; three others were wanted. Chalmers had been robbed of new bills; Garry Todd had dealt out new bills and to the hands of three natives. The overzealous Sandy Mills had suggested a plan of detecting the culprits by watching their expenditures. Altogether the strain on circumstance was too great.

Quinby's meditative tramp halted before the Ute

he had instructed to remain for a "make-talk." This proved not to be a protracted ceremony, and the inspector did the talking—straight.

"We're going to lock that money you got for Mrs. Six Bits' handmade blankets in the agency safe," he declared with decision. "You are not to leave the agency for any purpose without consulting me. You may get arrested and put in jail with the Cloud if you do. When the moon is full again, the money will be returned to you, cleaner than it is now by far. You won't understand the why of all this, but it is for your own good. You trust me, Six Bits; you know I am your friend? I have said."

He held out his hand. The Ute, with obvious reluctance, gave up the bills and stood by, as the inspector deposited them in the agency strong box.

Quinby's orders to the policeman who remained were equally to the point. Angry and Charley Horse were also to become depositors in the impromptu savings bank, whether they liked it or not. They, too, were not to leave the reservation without his permission, under the same threat that had just been communicated to Six Bits.

Leaving Custer Revell in lax-mouthed bewilderment, Quinby departed in search of his belated breakfast. He was satisfied that the plan would not grow the expected crop of false arraignments. Now for the planters! Oh, not Garry Todd! Clearly he was only a tool, who by now was probably congratulating himself that he had got off without betraying the least hint of his real purpose and would later report the fact to the one who had sent him.

As he attacked the juicy beefsteak soon placed be-

fore him by the beaming, inquisitive Mrs. Annie, his thoughts returned, as they had several times of late, to the enthusiastic projection into his problems of Winona's ranchman suitor.

In ill-advised zeal to score a sweep for his Law and Order League, he must have let slip to others than to Quinby and the girl, whose admiration he seemed determined to arouse, his plan for the currency trap. His great idea must have been borrowed and experimented with too soon for the success of it as planned, although not too soon to facilitate Quinby's approach toward the same end by another route.

He must not hold the young man's precipitancy against him, he reminded himself; he must not be too severe in his judgment because of the feminine complication. Every man, Quinby included, had been that young in enthusiasm once. "Our Artie," seasoned down, might one day satisfy even his brotherly demands.

The present point was that Mills' idea had sifted to the ears of those they both particularly sought—the white man behind the troubles of the red Utes. Naturally these schemers dared not risk the arraignment of their native tools; the substitution of suspects came in logical sequence.

Except for that chance meeting with Angry, the plan would have worked to perfection. The three bucks picked for slaughter sooner or later would have gone to town, flashed their crisp, new money, and been taken in by the seven-elevens. There was small chance that a jury would have believed their

testimony as to its acquisition, if Todd denied the transactions.

Likely there would have been more unjust punishment to add to the unrest of the already restless tribe. And unrest looked to the inspector to be the ultimate end and aim of the plotters—dovetailed nicely into all their activities. No wonder they had tried to frighten him off with shots from ambush!

But who were they—these disturbers of reservation peace? That was the paramount question. Was Spencer W. Albright, of the timely appearances, his guide to the answer? Also there was the unpleasant claim of a friendship with Illinoi' Hutchinson. If he followed the lawyer now, at once, would the trail lead to the trading post or to Circle Center? He started to the door, moved by the necessity to know.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WHITE PLUME

ON the steps of the little store, Illinoi' Hutchinson and Spencer W. Albright sat in close conference as Quinby rode in among the cottonwoods.

He waved a greeting to them, trying to show no sign of the disappointment he felt at finding the two together so soon after the issue at the agency. He drew rein for a moment at the foot of the steps, but did not accept the trader's invitation to dismount.

"Want you to meet my friend Albright," Illinoi' insisted, with a cordiality even more pronounced than usual.

His "friend," thought the inspector! The schoolma'am, then, had been right in asserting some bond between them. Was there foundation for the further charges she had made? That he could not bring himself to believe.

"You're too late, old-timer," he said aloud. "Albright and I clashed this morning."

"But that was in court, if I may so dignify your informal tribunal," inserted the lawyer quickly, rubbing his palms, "and for my client. I am delighted to meet you again socially. Hutch here has been telling me what you've done for my good clients, the Utes."

"You can't believe all Illinoi's boasts of the folks

he takes a fancy to," Quinby waved off the inferred compliment and turned to the trader. "Do you happen to recollect who dropped in at the store last night?" he inquired.

"I recollect too dinged well," drawled Hutchinson.

The inspector forced his eagerness under cover. If the trader happened to be able to name, say, a couple of customers—it mattered not the color of their skin—he might be giving a new lead as well as potential disproof of certain accusations. With hidden impatience, he awaited the veteran's deliberate relighting of his long-stemmed drop pipe.

"I'd recollect the name of even a squaw, had one dropped in to break the monotony," growled Hutchinson. "But there wasn't a soul. Since that screwgeed mix-up on the trail this has been the most forsaken mart between Cheyenne and El Paso. That's one reason I was so dod-burned glad to see Spencer to-day. You better 'light a while yourself, Alec."

Quinby shook his head. "Can't; got a riding date with Nona."

"You have, eh? Kind of sprucing up to the fact that my Beloved Brat's growed up, are you? Well, you'll find her over at the corral. Go to it with my blessing!"

Chuckling, Hutchinson dismissed him with relief so evident that Quinby could not decide whether it was on his own account or his daughter's.

If the girl herself was particularly delighted or surprised at his early acceptance of her suggested interview with the lady in the case, she did not show it. If she noticed such traces of the Cherry Bush fight as remained after his careful ministrations

at the agency, she concealed the fact with tact; he could not bring himself to believe it was with malice aforethought. She was already in riding clothes and her cream-colored mount was soon saddled.

As they started out toward the north, Quinby's eyes followed the direction of her farewell wave. The two older men were so deeply engrossed in their conversation that they did not look up.

"They seem to have a lot in common," he remarked.

"Oh, Spencer W. hails from Illinois, 'God's country, sir.'" She mimicked her father with fond and humorous exactitude. "That's quite enough for dad."

Enlightening as was this answer, he did not pursue the subject. For one thing, he was constitutionally disinclined to quiz any child about a parent. For another, he was determined that nothing should mar the pleasure of this ride with Winona to-day.

In many ways it excelled the previous night. True, there was not the coolness or mystery of the early darkness, but there was decided compensation in being able to see his metamorphosed little sister; to admire her poise in the saddle, her supple strength, her indubitable good looks.

Quinby always had enjoyed to see color in a woman's face. To-day the flash of Winona's pearly teeth, the true cerulean of her eyes, the blush rose of her cheeks delighted him. And that splendid hair of hers, innocent of a hat this afternoon and piled high, as on the first day of his return—surely its luxuriance and softness were rare enough without that odd plume of white that waved upward from the edge of her forehead! He wanted to ask her

when it had come and how, yet felt a delicacy to do so.

"Well, what is it?" Evidently sensing a question in his glance, she turned directly upon him.

"I was just thinking," he evaded with a grin, "what a handsome pair we make."

"Excuse me, but that doesn't sound straight talk," she returned, with her light-hearted laugh. "Even though you have improved a lot with the polish of your official wanderings, we don't make a handsome couple at all. You ought to know that. We shouldn't be considered as a couple ever, except, perhaps, as brother and sister. You ought to be riding with one of those helpless blondes, more like the pussy-cat lady. While I—well, to set me off, I ought to have a beau that doesn't look so much like the West; one with lightish hair, you know, and——"

"One something on the order of Mills?" he suggested.

She nodded with the almost boyish candor she had shown before. "Yes. Artie really looks made to order, since you mention it. As for us, Alec, we're too much the same in looks."

"Excuse *me*," he said, in the positive tone she had used a moment since, "but we're not at all! We're about as different as could be. Your complexion is light, mine dark. You've got the disposition of a prickly pear, while I——"

"Yes; poor little you!" she interrupted with a sniff. "Remember, before wasting your eloquence, that I know you and your disposition. Don't try to make me think a cactus like you is ever pansy meek!"

With a soft answer he retreated before her fusillade. "As for your eyes, Beloved Brat, they remind me a whole heap of heaven at its best; while mine are more like a muggy night."

"At least they're about as hard to see through," she inserted.

"Why, the only thing alike about us is the color of our hair, and there's a difference there since I went away." Quinby's questioning glance returned to the plume of white.

"You want to know how I came by my brand?" Her teasing smile faded, and she turned to the distant hazes with sudden gravity. "You know about dad's getting the pneumonia? There's pretty generally one awful night comes along with pneumonia —leastwise, it's right awful for the folks that sit around helpless, waiting—waiting to know. The doctor said dad was dragged back from the sand hills by my will. I don't know, but somehow I just couldn't let go of him. But next morning, I found I was marked this way for life. If I ever get lost, Alec, you can identify me by something newer than the picture in my locket."

Her smile wavered back as she made an effort to doff the sad memory for the happy present. But Quinby's face remained serious, even troubled, as he watched her.

"So—you love the old scout—as much—as that?" he asked slowly, as if he very much wished to hear her answer.

"*Love* him? He's all I've got."

"How about Mills?"

The second of his questions was greeted by her

provoking laugh. "Our Artie? Oh, I haven't got him yet! Not but what I have hope of bringing him around to the point. But, of course, time is needed to do the worth-while things of life—time and patient effort."

Alec Quinby had never regarded himself as a problem, and had been given more to the study of others than to introspection. But several times of late he had been puzzled by his own variable moods. Now he could not tell whether he was more annoyed or amused by her really startling frankness regarding the young eligible whom she was self-confessedly trying to corral. But he did realize that the brightness of the day, even his enjoyment of Winona's beauty, had been somehow spoiled for him.

Probably it was just because he did feel such a brotherly responsibility toward her, he told himself, that he could not be reconciled to her choosing a mate whose mettle he had not himself tested. Was it only that or was it—— But no! What right had he to jealousy?

The trail had become a level stretch; the horses, of their own accord, had increased their pace; further conversation would have been effortful. Quinby had plenty of time to consider the supreme quality of affection to which Winona had just testified, and that in conjunction with the possibility of Illinoi's having suffered an almost incredible perversion. What sacrifice would not be justified to spare the girl of the white plume from disappointment in her father?

CHAPTER XX

THE DREAM MINE

THE wikiup of White Leaf was not encumbered by the usual, but unused, annex of a white man's house. Too firm in the customs of his revered ancestors for any such innovation was the venerable chief. Moreover, his leadership was established, and he himself, above keeping up appearances.

Because of this unquestioned supremacy, White Leaf had been given the choice of allotments when the tribe was settled upon the reservation some years before. His selection of a small, but delightfully situated park at the upper end of the tribal lands had shown appreciation and good taste.

The inspector and his second of the contested handsome couple found the patriarch seated on the shady side of the most pretentious building of his group, at work dressing the skin of a white-tailed antelope—a manual task not beneath his regal dignity.

"I'd best make talk with him," suggested Quinby, seeing in the occasion an opportunity to renew the vows of friendship and mutual trust exchanged on the day of his arrival.

Winona assented with a nod. "I'll slope on to the cook thatch and have Daybreak rig up her mule. She'll speak more freely out in the open."

"Her mule?" Never had the inspector known a Ute to possess a hybrid.

"The blackest, orneriest one you ever sighted! The Cloud roped it in somehow on one of his trips to the south and presented it to Day. How she ever bunked old White Leaf into letting her keep such a present is one of the little mysteries of red romance which I haven't solved. Suffice it to say that she rides nothing else."

The aged chieftain vented a guttural "How!" for his male visitor, and even did him the honor of rolling up the half-dressed skin and definitely ceasing his task. For the white squaw, he spared not so much as a glance.

But Winona, knowing her place in his estimation, had expected no exception to formal rule. With a word to Quinby, she rode on to where she would find the women of the household. He dismounted to a seat upon the ground before the door.

After filling and lighting his brier pipe, he passed it to his host, who drew upon it solemnly.

"You bring news?" White Leaf asked, the formality completed.

"Yes; that Touching Cloud is guiltless of the murder."

"That is not news to me, Straight Talk. From the first I have known that he is guiltless."

"You did; but not I. Since I do absolutely know at last, I can promise you that he will be set free."

The fine, snow-white head shook the old chief's discouragement. "Would that your belief were shared by the judge and jury of your white court! Some one must be punished for the killing of Ollie Marsden. The law has Touching Cloud in its power; he may have to reap what he did not sow."

Earnestly Quinby sought to reassure him. He would stake his own life, he insisted, that justice would be done; that the Great Father in Washington would permit nothing else.

"I am here to enforce the law of the land to just ends," he declared. "I am working night and day to find the truth, but the task is made slow by the cleverness of those who are seeking to hide it. There are malefactors within your tribe, I am sorry to say, whom I must comb out as your women do burs from the mane of your horse. There are white men who use these weaker members for their own evil ends. Them we will crush as we would a poison snake."

"So!" The Indian frowned. "Then let all these evildoers be found soon, for my people are wroth and restless. Unless things are changed there will be more trouble than I will live to see ended. This murder of a white man is the last of many false charges against my sons. You would stake your life on the justice of your law. I, then, will stake mine that no member of the tribe did this deed. In person I have combed for the bur among us, but can find none who should be brought to you for punishment. If we had discovered such he would have been given over to you without delay."

"I have never doubted you," Quinby hastened to say.

White Leaf cut him short, however, with a commanding gesture and went on, his eyes blazing: "If it is written that the forked tongues of the palefaces who hate us shall move too fast for you to deny, my friend, I, who am head chief, cannot speak for

the contradiction of the Utes. Already the covers have been taken from the shields of my tribe. These I have ordered put back, but I do not hope for obedience. You know our braves are many when they gather from the four directions to avenge a tribal wrong. You know that they fight like devils when once they paint for war.

"You alone, Straight Talk," the chief continued, "stand between us and our ultimate destruction by the superior numbers of the white invaders. To you alone I lift my eyes for help. But make haste, I adjure you, lest it be too late! See that Touching Cloud, son of a chief, be set free by the law of your land, or we who are accounted so weak may do irreparable harm to the strong."

The solemn words of the patriarch did not deepen Quinby's realization of the gravity of the situation, for that he had already weighed. They did serve, however, to warn him that the investigation must be speeded, even though he were not yet able to topple all the ramifications of the plot.

White Leaf's reference to "uncovered shields," he understood to be figurative, but none the less ominous. No danger was there that the Utes would revert to bow-and-arrow days, even if Miss Trenholm's pupils did play with primitive weapons. It might well mean, rather, that they were stocking up with repeating rifles and ammunition thereof; that they were grooming their running ponies; that the smallest spark would touch off a magazine, the direction or force of whose explosion none could forecast.

Glancing up, he saw that Winona was waiting for him some distance from the main wikiup and

surmised that Daybreak had ridden on ahead to join them outside the park.

Exacting a promise from White Leaf that he would communicate with the agency by runner on the slightest development, and emphasizing those he had earlier given that justice should be done the tribe as quickly as lay within his power, he took his departure.

"And the lady in the case?" he asked Winona, as his sorrel ranged up alongside her white.

"Is no Alice-sit-by-the-fire," returned the girl. "She has been afield since early morning aboard the black mule. But I think I know where to find her —at Medicine Bowl, planting supplications that the Cloud's enemies may be confounded. Her mother hinted as much."

At a stiff pace they rode toward the escarpment which bounded the mesa on the north with wondrous variety of outline. From the distance this had the look of a petrified rainbow, its walls glowing with varied colors. Just within the world of rocks that loomed beyond they came to the grove of junipers. tucked away in a natural amphitheater—the objective set by Winona.

Here, in the old days, the Utes had cleared away the pinaceous trees to make a floor for their harvest and other dances. Here the doctors of the tribe had come to "make medicine." And here, as to a sanitarium, their patients had been brought for treatment. Here, also, had been staged the important councils of the tribe in deciding war and peace. It was at this place they finally had signed the treaty

with the Great Father which had made of them reservation Indians.

Both the inspector and Winona were familiar with the meeting place and rode straight toward the especial clearing consecrated for prayer to Those Above —the Garden of Supplication. Although they saw that the soft earth supposed to bring forth quick answers had been freshly planted, after the Ute practice of making sign pictures of their prayers and burying them, there was no sign of Daybreak herself. That she had been there and gone was probable and disappointing.

They decided to circle to the right and swing back by the tip of the Corkscrew on the chance that the bronze princess might have sought the scene of the catastrophe which had befallen her lover, for some special incantation in his behalf. On leaving the grove, Winona led the way, so did not notice the intentness with which her companion studied the markings of the seldom-used trail.

Regretful that he had wasted an afternoon at her suggestion, she was pleased when he rode up beside her and suggested a further diversion. "Do you recollect that this squaw-deserted stretch of country to the right was the scene of the most back-and-heart-breaking toil of my young life?" he asked.

"Now that you speak of it, I do—the Mine of Dreams!"

"Dreams that never came true," he added, sighing. "Still, I've a hankering for a look-in at the old diggings. The tunnel of calloused hands isn't far out of our way. How about it? Do you mind?"

"Not if you'll let me dream the dream over again.

You used to, you know, when you'd come over to the post too plumb played out to pick a scrap with me, but never too spent to think of things you were going to do with all the gold you expected to dig up at your rainbow's end."

From that point on, Quinby led, his head hanging slightly forward in thoughtful silence, yet he did not look to be dreaming exactly. The girl respected his mood willingly enough. She had dreams of her own with which to shorten the distance, although not of a sort she would have cared to share with him.

In time they turned into a gulch that lay perhaps a mile back from the Corkscrew trail and dismounted before the ruins of a shack which once had sheltered Quinby. Behind, like a mouth engaged in stifling a yawn, was the opening of the prospect tunnel he had driven. Taking an electric torch from his saddle-bag, Quinby started ahead of the girl into the darkness.

For thirty or forty feet they progressed slowly over the uneven floor, their bodies necessarily bent to avoid bumping their heads against the low roof. With physical relief they emerged into something of a chamber where Quinby had stoped upward in the hope of finding that vein of ore so emphatically, yet so falsely promised by the outcroppings of the ledge.

"You are covered—hands up!" The startling command from somewhere behind, had them completely off guard, but only Winona obeyed.

CHAPTER XXI

LIGHT IN DARKNESS

THE inspector centered his electric torch, strode forward a step, then stopped short, as if from a second jolt of surprise. Winona it was who moved to action. Outstretching her ordered-up hands, she rushed toward the intruder. "Wait!" she cried. "Don't fire on us. It is I, Nona!"

The moment's tension was snapped by her excited, gladsome cry. Before reply could be made, Winona had clasped the apparition from out of the tunnel's darkness in an embrace whose fervor was unhampered by the dangling gun.

"Of all the people in the world you would have expected," she called back to Quinby, "isn't Daybreak the last?"

As the inspector centered the spotlight upon the two girls, a smile of satisfaction twitched at his lips. "Not exactly the last," he said. "Doesn't day generally break in on the darkest hour? Maybe I ought to own up that I was wide awake to this one's coming, although I didn't expect her to thunderclap that elevate stuff on us."

"It isn't like you, Alec, to try an all-wise gag on me," objected Winona, with a frown that portended a thunderclap of her own. "You couldn't possibly have expected to find Day here in the mine!"

Quinby had the grace to banish all sign of triumph

from his face and made no further claim to foresight—at least not directly to her. He turned to the Indian maiden. "Where, little sister, did you cache your black mule!"

The Indian girl's appearance caused him to make as decided a mental readjustment as in the case of the Beloved Brat. The years had changed the slim dart of a child into a star burst worthy the worship of the many aspirants to her hand. No crudity of costume could disguise the ripe, enticing lines of this daughter of a chief.

The fringed buckskin gaiters and short skirt seemed cut to reveal rather than disguise; her waist of corn-ripe calico lent richly to her coloring; the shawl, made of four red bandannas sewed together and tied obliquely across her chest, looked a royal mantle; and all because her beauty of face and soul shone forth to glorify them. From between the two heavy, black braids that fell well below her waist, her fawnlike, candid eyes gazed appealingly, as if seeking always to see love and kindness and the truth. Her nose was straight, her lips chiseled in sweetness, the smooth oval of her cheeks lovely beyond compare.

No wonder, thought Quinby, in the flash of his first appraisal, that old White Leaf, son of a chief who was, in turn, son of many chiefs, considered unworthy all who aspired to such heavenly reward on earth.

Daybreak affected no need of an introduction to him. Well did she remember Straight Talk, to her a bogy-agent man who had invaded her childhood freedom and compelled her to trudge daily to the

paleface school. Now, her shy, unsmiling glance, as irradiated by the electric torch, seemed to ask her forgiveness for past injuries, assure him that he looked far from the ogre she had thought him.

"My mule pony," she was saying in stilted, resonantly voiced English, "he devour the willow shoot that live up the creek. There the trees hide him and that pleases Daybreak. They fill his ever-empty belly and that pleases him."

Winona also seemed to be seeking indulgence from the inspector as she asked: "Do you mean to tell me that you picked up Day's trail and followed it here?"

But, as usual, Quinby was provokingly averse to answering questions about himself. Fortunately there was no need in this case. His shrug told her all there was to know. She herself had informed him that White Leaf's daughter rode a mule. His eyes must have noted the peculiar hybrid track, so unusual thereabouts, as they left Medicine Bowl.

"I knew you had eyes *for* a cat," she commented, "but it seems also that you have those *of* one! Do you happen to know what Day finds to interest her in this dump of a thousand dreams?"

"She is a woman. Quién sabe?"

He seemed preoccupied, slipping back the guard at the end of the torch, changing it from a searchlight into a tiny open bulb.

"I alone sabe! I will tell you," offered Daybreak. "I have waited here on each day and some of the nights since the bad happening."

From the look of sadness that had obscured the brightness of her face, from the way she clutched

her throat and made effort to continue, neither of her listeners had to ask what "bad happening" she meant.

"I hear steps in the tunnel that rejoice me," she went on, after a moment. "They come at last, is my thought! I am to have revenge. Against the rock of the wall I press myself. My revolver is ready if I find use for it. The steps come nearer. A light throws many flickers ahead. I cease to breathe; they brush past me. Hai ya, they are but two! The one gun of Daybreak is enough for any two. I slip into the tunnel mouth to cut off all escape. I invite, though not politely, that their hands go up and then—— Then the voice of my friend brings disappointment. I no longer wish to shoot, for it is, in truth, only Nona."

"Can't say you're especially flattering," said the white girl, but in sympathetic tones. "Just who is it that you would have preferred to us? Who was marked down for that gun-point reception?"

"I prefer the murder men who wish that Touching Cloud should pay for their crime," Daybreak answered earnestly. "I will make a brighter light; then you, my friends, may see that I have cause to expect such to come to this place."

With a surety of movement that bespoke an intimate acquaintance with the stope chamber and its contents, she reached up to a shelf in the porphyry wall and produced a pine knot. When Quinby had set this ablaze for her, his eyes stared, at last showing real surprise, at the revelations of the added light.

The stope of his fruitless toil had been transformed into a habitation, cramped, to be sure, but not without certain comforts. Rude, double-decked frames

supported bunks, which were provided with blankets. A shot of dynamite in the roof had opened to a natural fissure, providing a flue for a sheet-iron stove. About were cooking utensils, tin dishes, and a supply of food.

"Who, in the name of all your ancestors, do you reckon went to all this trouble for a stone house?" he asked, his wondering glance back upon the fair Ute. "Looks as if we may have struck the pay streak at last."

"Men who would dwell in the darkness of evil deeds." Her reply had an almost solemn intonation.

The girls watched Quinby as he went into the deeper shadows of the farther rock wall. Following with the pine torch, they saw what had caught his attention—that pegs had been driven into the sheer wall, from which hung several Indian outfits, complete from feathered war bonnets to fringed pants of skin and quill-adorned moccasins. He stepped close and counted the costumes; the number was four!

Fuller possibilities of the improvised dressing room were suggested with the discovery of several pots of clay worked into paint. One in particular of them held green—the false color note of Touching Cloud's make-up which had drawn comment from old Illinoi' on that day of the arrest.

A bottle stood beside the paint layout, a sniff at the neck of which reported its contents unmistakably—stramonium. At once his mind cut back to the picture of Doctor Noisy Walk clumsily trying to hide the fact that he was at work on a jimson-weed brew. Evidently those who had appropriated Quinby's mine were prepared to put decided kick

into the whisky they might wish to serve, say, for the purpose of leaving a befuddled victim seemingly red-handed at the scene of crime.

He was examining a blanket, carelessly tossed upon one of the bunks, and had noted that it was new, gray-blue, of store grade, when a cry from his volunteer torchbearer, followed by a sudden withdrawal of the light, diverted him.

CHAPTER XXII

BLEACHED WHITE

EVIDENTLY Daybreak had discovered something under another of the bunks which demanded her immediate attention, for she was on her knees upon the uneven floor, reaching beneath.

"Hai, ya, that last prayer—why did I linger to plant it?" the two whites heard her repine. "The evil ones have been here—been here and gone once more! So says this sign that they——"

She broke off with a laugh which contrasted strangely with her recent wail. When again she stood erect, they saw that her free hand held a somewhat battered-looking sombrero.

"We have known from the first, the chief—my father—and I, that none of our race did this crime. See you, my friends, I now have proof of it!"

As she waved her find triumphantly, Winona sprang forward to examine it. Pulling out the leather sweatband, she held its perforated initials toward the light.

Quinby's expression was equivocal as he stood aside watching her, expectant, yet marked by a certain dread.

"Why—why——" Winona stammered, looking across at him strangely. She then turned in the band of the hat, after a suspicious glance at the Ute maiden.

"No red man wears such a hat or stamps his name within," Daybreak insisted, as if in answer to some challenge. "Return it to me who found it, for I would see the letters for myself!"

Winona, however, backed away from the outstretched hand, as if afraid to share what she had seen.

"Come, read us the initials," Quinby urged. "Through them we may identify——"

"You want them read aloud, Alec?" Winona gave him again that strange, wounded glance, hesitated, and stammered: "There—there are but two."

"Two's plenty of initials for a short-name country," he commented. "We're all trustworthy here. What are they?"

Winona steadied herself. "They are," she said in a dull, even tone, "A. Q."

"A. Q.?" repeated Daybreak. "Are those not the initials of—of——"

She also turned toward the inspector, but Winona had claimed all his attention.

"You are wearing, Alec, a new—a different hat from that of yesterday," she said, her tone low, imploring. "Tell me—tell me what it means. The initials are yours; the sombrero——"

"Is also mine," he interrupted with a laugh whose naturalness was meant to reassure them. "It's all right, so don't waste another moment on worry. I bought that kelly in Salt Lake City not two weeks ago. Lost it last night and am dinged glad to get it back before interested parties can use it against me; said parties having a habit of leaving false clews around handy. Now don't look so put out,

Princess of the Day! Your finding of my top-piece here is going to contribute quite a few candle power toward seeing through this muggy scheme. In other words, it has forged another link in this chain that's soon to be locked around the right wrists."

"They will be white—those wrists!"

"As white as my own. Now, I want you two just to trust the rest to me. The best help you can give right now is to twist a hackamore on your tongues so far as concerns saying anything we have found in this"—he glanced with amusement at Winona—"this dump of my thousand dreams."

"But the young brave, Touching Cloud, who looks to me for help—he must be saved before you dream so many dreams!"

There was a new note of stress in the girl's protest. Throwing off the inherent reticence of her race, she stepped directly before Quinby, touched his arm, as if to ask him sympathy, lifted a face that interpreted emotions far more eloquently than did the halting explanation in her native tongue.

"If he, my beloved, does not rise to touch the clouds again, the Day will die. It is my fault alone that he sits now in the white man's jail. When White Leaf scorned the ponies the young man offered for my hand, I should have said, as have other maidens, 'I follow, O my father, where I love.' But I am the daughter of a chief and have not learned to disobey. I but reflected his scorn, and I told the Cloud he must bring many ponies. He accused me that I cared not, and this I did not deny. In truth, I knew not the greatness of

my love until I saw to what my denial had cast him down. It was on my account that he drank the drink that left him without discretion, and I—I——"

The brave voice broke and, although she still held her head thrown proudly back, her form shook like a reed in a wind from the north.

Winona's arms were thrown about her in support, while Quinby roused himself to speak strong words of reassurance.

She must no longer reproach herself; she could put aside her despair, he declared. Her Cloud would rise again, probably better and wiser for having paid so heavy a price for his folly on her account. He would be cleared and set free sooner than she expected; that he, Straight Talk, promised her. It would not be necessary for her to continue her ambush at the mine, now that she had lighted the dark secrets within. She must open her heart and mind to peace; she must leave all the rest to him.

He took the sombrero from Winona, blew out the pine torch and, lighting the way with the electric one, urged them out into the open. But there he noticed that Daybreak was reluctant to retrieve her black mule from the willows for the ride home. His further questioning brought the admission that she had not yet shown them all the mysteries of the hide-out.

"They have made ready also the blow-off!" With a shudder, she half whispered the confidence in the stilted school English of which she was so proud.

By way of answering their questions, she led them to a point just above the tunnel entrance. There

a slide had been stopped in its erratic course by a spike of granite. That removed, tons of shale and boulders must crash downward to the creek, making the abandonment of the mine complete by hiding all trace of it.

Daybreak came to a halt before the granite retainer, pawed away some of the loose shale and revealed a piece of oilcloth, evidently cut from some cow-puncher's poncho. After removing this protection against dampness, she pointed to a length of fuse leading into a well-drilled hole which bore every evidence of having been charged with explosive.

Quinby stared at it, then at the intrepid Indian girl in admiration. "Do you mean to say, Daybreak, that you have stayed within the mine, hoping for more evidence, when any moment they might return, discover you, and set this infernal contraption off?"

She waved away the tribute. "You know how to blow him off? You do that now," she suggested.

Quinby, however, shook his head. "And shut in all the evidence against them? No, sister; I've got a better idea than that."

He knelt down, tested the dryness of the fuse to his satisfaction, then replaced the rubber cloth and recovered it carefully with shale.

"We'll leave it," he said. "It just might come in handy."

While Daybreak went for her mule, he and his riding mate returned to the tumble-down shack and mounted their waiting horses.

The Day had reappeared, splashing down the creek,

when Winona made a discovery. "Your hat!" she exclaimed. "Are you determined to lose it?"

"I am," he acknowledged with his dry smile. "I tossed it back under the bunk."

"But, Alec, don't you realize the risk—that they really may, as you suggested, use it against you?"

"Just what I want them to do, though it's not such a hair-raising risk at that."

In fact, he added to himself, the risk was no longer his, now that he knew the Utes had not been used in the crime plot, even as tools. The color of the game, in other metaphor, had been bleached clear white!

CHAPTER XXIII

SURPRISING WEAKNESS

THERE was official reason why Inspector Quinby should route his ride to the county seat to include a dismount at Star Square Ranch. A conference with Sandy Mills, active head of the Law and Order League, came next in that longest way round which, in this most intricate case of his career would seem to be the "shortest way home."

Just how one-sided it should be, he was willing to leave to circumstance, with the reservation that, for the time being, the Ute maiden's discovery of the new use for his old mine should remain their secret of yesterday.

Also quite to himself, as William dusted the trail, Quinby admitted a second reason for the visit; one that had no bearing on the troubles of the Rolling Stone Utes, but held even greater interest to himself. This had to do with the same man in a personal capacity—with Our Artie as a suitor for the hand of Winona—a brat no longer, to risk the hit or miss of luck in her choice, but an American queen who deserved the best of the country's man crop.

Quinby intended, while discussing with Mills the general issues of public peace and the more particular one of the murder of Ollie Marsden, to note carefully all details of the manner in which the young

man lived. Also to discover what he was thought of in his own home; to adjudge him, in short, by his habits, his ranch house, the personnel of his outfit and their attitude toward the boss. According to all precedent in his experience, no better way existed of learning a man.

Admonishing himself anew that, in his big-brotherly mission, he must not be critical to a point of prejudice, he turned from the main trail and loped down upon the woodsy, creek-bend clump which Mills had selected as headquarters for the restricted, fenced-in ranching that had come with the passing of the free range.

The buildings, which presently developed to the view, were not pretentious as to size and lacked the finish of paint. One low, tar-roofed structure seemed to serve as habitation for all concerned—cook shack, bunk house, and owner's quarters all in one. As Quinby remembered, however, that Star Square was a bachelor outfit, this rather pleased him than otherwise, bespeaking, as it did, a regard for utility and disregard of style which the ranchman certainly did not show in his personal appearance.

Quinby also noted with approval the fact that the barn was more sizable than the ranch house and better built, suggesting winter comforts for the horses of the Mills' string. A devotee of the king beast himself, he was glad to see this—a sign of animal appreciation and sound ranching methods.

But the pleasant first impression was smudged when his glance focused upon the stout corral near by—rather the decorations thereof. Five bright-shirted punchers sat perched upon the top rail, ragging a

sixth engaged in busting a broncho within the arena. The general sportive atmosphere of the scene, the idleness of so many hands at the busiest season of the year, argued waste of man power and disregard for overhead, pocket straining at the best.

Yet Mills himself was not among the spectators of the corral sport. Making sure of that, Quinby rode on to the house. There his shout brought to one of the doors that opened on the gallery a rotund individual, whose uprolled sleeves and enveloping apron rated him on sight as cook.

"The old man ain't in residence right at the present moment," this worthy responded elaborately to Quinby's statement of his identity and object. "This danged seven-eleven stuff is giving him more jumps than a flea. I'm Short Cake—best culinary artist short of the Pecos, if I do say it myself who shouldn't. As second in command of this here outfit, I'm pleased to extend to you full and complete hospitalities."

Marveling how even the best-fed mortal could survive such loss of language, Quinby thanked him and suggested that he would ride over to the corral for a word with the boys and a possible chance meeting with some acquaintance.

"Nothing like that, Mr. Inspector," protested Short Cake, evidently determined to do the guest all possible honor. "You're just going to put up your horse and come right in. In ten minutes or so, I'll be hammering the triangle for a meal what is a meal. Them hombres will come a-streaking for the same and I'll meet you to them proper."

The early hour at which Quinby had breakfasted

left him rather susceptible to this savory prospect. He dropped rein, and the cook, with a continuous, reckless spill of verbosity, ushered him into a living room, roughly furnished and branded "bachelor," whichever way one turned.

A saddle, evidently in course of repair, decorated one chair top; the hearth of the open firepalce was literally carpeted with cigarette stubs; from wall pegs dangled riding gear, assorted articles of masculine apparel, and quite a formidable armament of holstered guns.

"I ain't got round to redding up in here this week," apologized the cook, but without annoyance.

"Nor last month," thought Quinby, surprised that a man of Mills' fastidiousness of attire could abide in such litter.

Evidently the best culinary artist west of the Pecos felt his disapproval. "Not that it would be any use with such a hellion outfit as the Star's," he said. "Most of 'em must 'a' just grew, like a certain little black girl I've hearn tell about, for sure they never knelt at mother's knee long enough for tidiness to get set in their blarsted constitutions. But you come along into the sanctum sanctorium. There ain't no law agin' your brushing up, I reckon."

Forthwith, he threw open the door of a smaller room. Into it Quinby stepped with considerable relief—its good taste, comfort and orderliness doubly grateful after the dirt and disarray without. In it he found real furniture, from bureau to brass bed, roll-top desk to morris chair. And not the most suspicious housewife would have thought from the surface look of things to apply her dusting rag.

"I superimpose my cleaning propensities on this here sweet-ey each and every a. m. myself," declared Short Cake, with a proudful, pudgy sweep of the hand which eventually included a collection of photographs tacked upon the wall. "There ain't nothing too good or partic'ler for our young-old man. He's got to have the best—come it horses or grub, liquor or women. I ask you now, ain't yonder some galaxy of female pulchertude? Every one of them dames, leave me tell you, is or has been personally beknownst to the boss, if not plumb crushed on him, as you can see by the superscriptions handwrit beneath. He's some winner of skirts is Mister Arthur Miils, but he plays them square—one at a time."

The fat nose was suddenly lifted to sniff the air. "Hell's fire! what's that smell? My biscuits! The devil!"

With an agitated twaddle the understudy host returned to his regular rôle and the kitchen. A whiff of burning dough had warned him of impending failure in the production of that "meal which is a meal."

Quinby's attention remained upon the highly decorative group of photographs. "A galaxy—you *said* something, Shorty!" he murmured comment.

But he did not draw closer to examine the names mentioned by the cook. He turned from the varied types of charmers represented with the same promptness and distaste that had turned him from the types themselves during his travels. In the absence of one face, rather than the presence of many, had lain his momentary interest. He had to give Mills

credit that Winona's picture, if possessed, was not cheapened by display.

Despite the illuminating insight given by the room on the owner's character, he was embarrassed by this solitary possession. Short Cake had overstepped the bounds in his proffer of hospitality and had put the guest, thereby, at a disadvantage.

With the idea of brushing up and withdrawing as quickly as possible, Quinby stepped toward the bureau. He was reaching for a whisk broom when his eyes chanced upon another photograph, one which was nicely framed and placed in the position of honor.

Quinby's face, at first utterly amazed, hardened as he stood looking at it. Then he seized it in his hands, bore it to the strongest light and studied intently its every detail. At a sign—*the* sign of the man which he had hoped to find on this visit—the presence of Arthur Mills' photograph upon his own dresser could scarcely have been more significant.

From the dressed-up print, which bore the mark of a Denver photographer and evidently had been taken several years before, the handsome subject beamed a question back to him. Why should a man frame a photograph of himself and place it where he must daily gaze upon it, unless he frankly admired it? So then, Our Artie's weakness was vanity; he thought more of his own looks than of any of the specimens of feminine pulchertude of his past.

"Humph!" Quinby remarked, well under his breath. And again, after a hard-thinking pause: "Humph!"

CHAPTER XXIV

AT MILLS' RANCH

IN the short space of time between his picking up the sign and replacing it, Quinby had seen a truly strong light. Afterward he never again wavered between approval and disapproval of Mills as aspirant to one of the greatest honors of the world. He disapproved.

And he never again charged himself with prejudice in that quarter. Dislike was not prejudice when one had good reason for it.

The chief thing that worried him now was how far the affair had gone; just how deeply the little pard would be hurt when he broke it off, as break it off he must.

Preferring his coat dusty to using Mills' brush, he strode out of the sanctorium into the rough-and-ready general quarters from where he could hear the triangle sounding its grub-pile call.

Such was the rush in response of the men of the outfit, that all had drawn up to the oilcloth-covered board and were banging upon it for service with their knives and forks when Short Cake ushered him into the combination diner-kitchen.

At once, the flicker of surprise which flashed around the table told that the punchers had been too absorbed in the busting exhibition at the corral to make any conjecture anent his arrival. That his

name seemed all the cook considered necessary by way of identification, however, suggested that other detail regarding him and his office was generally known.

With a wordiness for which the visitor fortunately was prepared, the self-appointed master of ceremonies called the roll, adding a characterization touch to each name.

There was Scarlet—surname omitted—whom the inspector could pick for himself by the face flag always waving in front of him; there was Hank Hall, a pasty-looking youth, to be sure, but a lunger entertaining no serious idea of croaking. There was Pedro Romero, swarthy and Mexican, of whom least said soonest mended; there also were Just Jones, with whom all visitors were warned not to play cards, and Sam Monday, who stuck to leather as if he were a streak of the grain.

"Last and, as a matter of fact, least," concluded Short Cake, "permit me to meet you to Lofty Dougherty who coddles a delusion that he's the dod-blasted whole foreman of this here outfit as detailed."

The punchers, brought in turn into the spotlight, had acknowledged the introduction with nods and grins. Now, as the cook waddled with surprising speed over to the stove and the dishing-out process, the man, named as under a delusion, arose and shot across the board a leathern hand of greeting. Except for his height, which topped Quinby's by at least a couple of inches, the most striking thing about him was his rasp of voice. His impulse, in contrast, seemed pleasant enough.

"Glad to throw a sight on you, inspector," he said. "We heard you'd come to drive these pesky Utes back into old Mrs. Rectitude's corral—and not a moment too soon, say all of us. Sit down there in our old man's chair and give your face a treat o' victuals."

There ensued a few minutes of strained conversation, in which Quinby overcame his aversion to speech in an effort to put the outfit at their ease. All were strangers to him, a fact not surprising considering the influx of new blood into the region during the years of his absence, but one that made difficult a choice of subjects. As speedily developed, the only topic in which they showed interest was the common trouble of the community, which the cowmen were one in blaming on the Utes.

"Being a gov'ment man, I ca'c'late your leanin' is toward them blanket brutes," observed he introduced as Scarlet, a heavy frown darkening his hectic visage. "But it's a wrong tilt, I'm telling you."

"The only special leaning I've got is toward the truth," declared Quinby. "No doubt of that being the right tilt, is there? I'm leaning and looking, don't you worry, with an open mind."

The tall foreman nodded approvingly. "You and our boss, Mills, are hitting the same trail. And time it is that somebody with seeing and shooting sense did the same, although I, as has to run the ranch while he's philandering, tell him he's wasting a sight of time and hoss flesh on this here law-and-order gag."

"Seeing sense—shooting sense?" growled Monday, who looked to be a veteran of the range,

"'Pears to me the authorities be all blind as bats, begging of your pardon in particaler, Mr. Inspector. The truth is as plain and prominent as Hank's Roman nose yonder. I ain't much on spelling, but they's only three letters in this—U-t-e!"

Intent on taking the temper of local opinion as shown by this average-looking ranch outfit, Quinby repressed any bias. He raised no objection to the ensuing arraignment of the Rolling Stone tribe, participated in by all between bites or from out of crammed mouths. Only when the food rivaled the topic did he whet their appetite for discussion with a question, assertion, or contradiction.

His interest sped to the pace of their denunciation. In fact, as fullness succeeded their avid attack upon Short Cake's really praiseworthy effort in the general behalf, Quinby found it unnecessary to aid or abet. Even Sandy Mills came in for their outspoken criticism. His blessed league was too deliberate an instrument for fire eaters like themselves. Bitterly they lamented that their hands as individuals were hoppled by their allegiance to him as employer.

"As if the murder of Ollie Marsden wa'n't bad enough!" flared Scarlet. "Onless the game's coppered pronto, we'll be hearing of worse, or I pass. I'm pestered with bad dreams nights over what might happen to some of our white women as have settled down, trustinglike, about the range. What them bucks need is a jolt."

"And a jolt they're going to get!" The assurance was drawled by the old-timer, Sam Monday, who, as the earlier table talk had established, was just back at the ranch from a sojourn in town.

Everybody squared around toward him, caught by something of excitement in the very deliberation with which he had spoken.

"Come out of the brush, Sam," demanded Just Jones. "Where away is your tongue pacing?"

"Nowheres that you-all will object to follow, I reckon. Down to Circle there's lots saying, leave me tell you. This here community has stood all it's going to from lazy law and ornery order."

"But the boss——" reminded Short Cake, who was now feeding his handiwork into his own fishlike mouth from the end of the table nearest the stove.

"I 'low the boss won't be an eggshell in the scramble when it comes to stretching the Cloud," Monday answered with droned significance. "For the advisement and information of the other mad dawgs of the pack, I might add as how that there particaler buck's necktie is ordered. All I'm festering about is that I'm signed up to this here Sunday-school outfit and can't have a hand in the tying."

"A necktie party?" "For sure?" "Where?" "When?" The questions of the men were chorused.

Quinby's ears were most receptive, although he betrayed no excitement over the information, to which old Monday seemed on the point of adding with more indiscretion.

Lofty Dougherty, however, took the topic firmly by the throat and choked off further news. "A fine line of talk to be gabbing at Sandy Mills' table!" he exclaimed, pushing back his chair. "What have we got the seven-elevens for if not to support the law? Somebody's given you an earful, Sam, just because you're one of us shooting stars and hanker for any

kind of a scrap. It's all right to bring back news, but you can't set reading it aloud all day! Which reminds me that you'd better be up and doing—all of you."

As the punchers filed out, the foreman embarked upon another effort to discount to their guest the old-timers' portent of a lynching. Sam was a credulous idiot, he declared, always peddling misinformation. Dougherty hoped the inspector would not get a wrong impression of the outfit from the loose talk of one member. They really were getting used to upholding law and order, and every man Dick of them was a member of the league in good standing.

Indeed, the foreman so overstepped upon the soft pedal that he utterly defeated his object. Quinby felt a conviction that Monday's statement had some basis of truth; that Touching Cloud really was in danger of paying the unjust penalty which his people feared for him.

Such an outrage at the hands of the whites would further the purpose which he was convinced the plotters had in view—the precipitation of the outbreak of which Chief White Leaf had warned him. He must get to Circle Center without delay. At any cost the young buck must be spared. If he could hold off the issue just a little longer now!

His mental machinery, speeded by the emergency, outlined a course of action that seemed inspirational. He glanced up, attracted by Lofty's stare, and realized that some sort of a remark was due from him.

"Ropes they spin yarns about beforehand are seldom tied with hangman's knots," he said prosily,

as if shrugging away the subject. "Thank you for a good meal and hour. I'll be sloping along now."

"But the old man—he'll likely be here any minute, and he sure won't make allowances for me letting you get off without seeing him."

Dougherty's objection brought to the forefront of the inspector's mind that official conference he had intended to hold with the seventy-seven of the seven-elevens. With an uncharacteristic foregoing of business because of disinclination, however, he pushed it aside. He did not wish to meet Mills just yet. That revelation of a young man's framed photograph on his own dresser had told quite too much about him. If they should confer now, that good scrap of Winona's first-day prophecy, based on the fact that both liked so well to run things, might be precipitated.

And he did not wish to scrap; he had been sent there to right old quarrels, not to commit the wrong of new ones.

His visit to the Star Square Ranch had proved one of the great hunches of his hunch-inspired life. During it, he had received a call, a rope-strangled cry, for the protection of a guiltless human life. He rode, forthwith, to answer it.

CHAPTER XXV

A WELCOME CHANCE

DISAPPOINTMENT awaited the inspector at the end of his ride from the Mills Ranch. Judge Horatio Clayton, he was informed at the courthouse, had gone up to the city—otherwise Salt Lake—and would not return until the following afternoon.

As the sparsely settled county boasted but a single judge, Quinby's hands were tied for twenty-four hours so far as putting into operation that ready-made plan to save Touching Cloud. Determined to utilize the delay, he turned himself to the original object of his visit to Circle Center.

He rode across the square, dismounted before the Gun Sight Hotel, and turned his mount over to a hostler. Inside the office he met an enthusiastic reception from Oscar Trevis, the genial, square-built proprietor, a friend since boyhood. It was not necessary for him to word his disinclination to register—his waving aside of the proffered pen proved enough of a hint for this sagacious soul. Equally informal was his selection of a room, one whose number he remembered from past sojourn therein and now particularly desired. That its window overlooked the one-story county jail, where the young buck was imprisoned, had been the determining factor of his choice rather than any exceptional merit

of the room itself, although this he did not consider necessary to explain to the boniface.

"I'd rather you didn't get out an extra announcing my return, Oscar," he requested. "For public reasons I want to look the most private simp that ever sloped into Circle for the first time. I'm interested in real estate hereabouts, packing a roll that I'm plumb loco to unwrap. See? Now, is there anybody in particular loafering around who'd be interested in my sort of a boob if you'd make strong mention of the roll? I'm in something of a hurry to get the lay of the land."

"You are, eh? Say, do you reckon there's anybody loafering around who'd have the front to give you the lay of anything in Four States?" Trevis cackled admiringly with his objection. "It'd be like toting beefsteak to a cow ranch!"

"No regular rules apply to a real estater; you know that, pard. There's just one irregular rule that runs the whole kit-caboodle of them—make a sale. What I want you to do is to put one or another of the sharps that came in with the boom onto me. I need to get done up pronto for my own good. Don't forget my backing; you don't have to stretch the truth. There *is* unlimited money back of me; you're patriotic enough to know that, aren't you? Do you get the idea, Oscar?"

Oscar did, more or less, as he signified by a slow, wary wink. "I know just the man if you'll keep the rubber band on that roll until after supper."

Quinby got the bag which he had stored on starting to the reservation and went to his room. When he emerged a few minutes later, all trace of the

range had been doffed with his change of apparel. In his gray fedora, business suit, and low shoes, he looked the part of a prosperous man of affairs.

That the change he had wrought in his appearance was successful he realized when, on descending to the street, no one seemed to recognize him.

The boom and its bursting had wrought many changes in the town itself and particularly in its population. Most of the faces were strange. Only twice did he deem it wise to become occupied with the nearest window display while ranchman or old citizen went by.

Although his interest centered in the county jail, he did not visit that institution or seek an interview with Touching Cloud. More important was it to study the temper of the town.

To all outside appearances, however, Circle Center seemed in a normal state. The hitching racks were thinly occupied, an indication that few were in from the range. Among the traders whose scraps of conversation he did manage to overhear, without attracting undue attention to himself, there sounded no note of suppressed excitement. He returned to the hotel, congratulating himself that there still seemed time for the execution of his coup along the lines he had originally mapped out.

As he entered the office the proprietor hailed him: "Hi there, Alexander; you're just in time! Here's a man that knows more about Four States realty than the county assessor. Charles Earth, esquire, one of our leading cits. I just been giving him an earful."

In another moment the inspector found his hand in the grip of a dynamo in human guise who was

addressing him as Mr. Alexander, thanks to the quick wit of the boniface. After that, developments seemed to accommodate themselves to his foreplanned end. Mr. Earth, it appeared, took his meals at the hotel. No; he could have no possible objection to such good company at supper.

To both of them the meal proved truly enjoyable, although for diverse reasons. At its close the real-estater, obviously gratified at having met with such an attentive listener, proposed that they adjourn to his office, less than a block away, where they could continue their talk in greater privacy.

There came tribute to Quinby's ability to establish confidence in himself when he found himself seated opposite his new acquaintance in a room hung with maps and blue prints, its street window decorated with phenomenal products of more or less local soil. Across the flat-topped desk, which occupied the center of the room, Charles Earth leaned toward him with an ultraconfidential manner.

"Trevis spoke more of truth than he knew, Mr. Alexander, when he said a while back that you were just in time," he began, his voice the stage rasp of secrecy.

"Time for what?" Quinby affected the studied indifference that he had often noticed in business men keyed up to do each other and was pleased to note its reflex.

"You are in time—almost to the minute to get in on the ground floor. Circle Center, sir, is booked for another boom; but one, this time, that's going to be a regular stem-winder, not a key-twisted proposition like the last which brought me here. It's been

a deep, dark secret, with just a few foresighted souls among us in the know, up to this day and this hour. The truth is, we can use a little more capital—just a little more—if we get it quick. Travis' recommendation means a lot to me, and he says you've got money back of you. Unlimited money was the way he measured it."

"Almost unlimited," Quinby corrected. "I calculate that every roll, like every mortal's span o' days, has got an end."

Mr. Earth waved aside this somewhat remote objection. "I've got a reputation for taking a man's number at first sight, and I'm going to risk our venture on the supposition that you are as square as you look. You'll understand, of course, that what I'm about to tell you is in the strictest confidence. But then you'll see in a minute that a tight lip is for your own best interest."

Quinby nodded to the effect that the other had sized him up correctly, and that the confidential nature of that which was to come was fully understood.

"Now, the forthcoming acceleration party I'm telling you about is to be unique in the history of the West," Earth went on. "You're doubtless familiar with balloon ascensions, lottery prizes, buy-a-lot-and-get-one-free, and like schemes of attracting the investing public. But we're going to start off with a crash bang that would make all the brass bands in the Four States, playing different tunes at the same time, sound like a summer zephyr. Listen!"

The dealer in deeds flattened himself farther over the desk top and dropped his voice to a whisper: "We're arranging, if you please, an Indian revolt!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PLOT

ALEC QUINBY straightened and returned an amazed look to this announcement. In truth, he was wondering whether his ears had not deceived him; whether this invited confirmation of his suspicions regarding the evident white manipulation of the Utes had not come too easily to be true. They must be more desperately in need of cash than Mr. Earth had cared to admit.

"An honest-to-goodness, hit-the-warpath uprising, I'm telling you!" the cautious voice elaborated. "There'll be paint and feathers, torch and tomahawk —all the fixings."

"You mean that you're going to stage a wild West show to draw a crowd from the city?" the prospective investor asked with seeming simplicity.

"Poof-la! Nothing so weak as that. This is to be bona fide, I tell you; the real article. The Utes out at Rolling Stone, we have every reason to know, are about to jump their reservation."

Quinby's look of amaze altered into disapproval. For the life of him, he declared, he did not see how an Indian uprising could possibly be used as the motive power for a boom. On the contrary, would not it give the whole region a bad name with the easily alarmed public?

Earth's anxiety to convince him increased. The

proposition would become clearer to an outsider, he argued, if he went into recent history. Under an agent who was not equal to his job, this particular tribe of Utes had been running wild. It had become necessary to form a Law and Order League which was making things so hot for the Indians that their favorite pastime of pillage was no longer pleasurable or profit sharing. The details of the Marsden murder and the capture of one buck red-handed were cited duly. As the execution of this culprit was to be attended to without delay, he had reason to believe that the signal for breaking bounds would simultaneously be sounded.

"Now here's where we come in," the dealer explained convincingly. "Once off the reservation, we're not going to let those Utes come back. They're bloodthirsty devils at the best and don't deserve a white man's consideration. All wrought up as they are, they'll go killing and burning until the troops round them up. As for us, you'd better believe we'll let out a cry of alarm that will be heard clear back to Washington. There'll be absolutely nothing for the government to do but to close-herd the tribe near some fort until a safe desert can be found for them, with no whites near enough to pester.

"The next logical step for the powers that be," he went on, " is to throw that vacant reservation open to settlers. It's a sure go, I tell you, for our politicians are right—just waiting for the excuse. With people everywhere hungry for land and more land, it means a regular wave of homesteaders. Circle Center is their natural and only trading point, and property here is bound to hit the sky. The clean-up

will be, as you said of your backing, *almost* unlimited."

Even more confidential in manner grew Mr. Earth as he returned to the reason behind his rather immediate disclosure of this deep-laid scheme. After they had gone so far, with this vast orchard of juicy fruit about ready for the picking, they had been disappointed in the available reserve of one of their number and found themselves short of capital necessary for absolute control of the bonanza. To profit to the utmost, they must have options on practically the whole of Circle Center. Their little group preferred to extend the chance to outside capital for obvious reasons, and here was Mr. Alexander's opportunity. If it had not been for Trevis' tip, he would never have dreamed—— But he was convinced that they could come to a mutually satisfactory arrangement which would mean riches for all concerned.

Moreover, there were plump plums waiting for them individually, outside of the sure profit from the boom rise of county-seat values. Advance knowledge would give them the pick of the farming property within the reservation, and, by employing dummies, each of the principals could acquire for himself as much acreage as he desired. In addition to which, the water rights would be taken under control by systematic filing on the right sections.

The gradual cessation of questions and objection on Quinby's part must have seemed a dawning appreciation of the scheme. In reality, he had been distracted by a mental cut-back of his own discovery of that corner post in the allotment of Six Bits near

Rain Tank. From that moment he had foreseen in a general way the plan which Earth had just disclosed in such interesting detail.

A silence on the part of the real-estater, more startling than the loudest of his declamations, awoke Quinby to the advisability of offering further objection.

"Boom profits are all well enough," he said, "but I'm more interested in permanent investment. Are these tribal lands fertile enough to support a white population?"

"The land is the best ever." Again the momentarily exhausted land dealer was off. "They'll pay from the first crop, and in five years, Rolling Stone will be another name for the Garden of Eden. But you don't have to take my word for it. I'll introduce you to Bart Tomlinson, a surveyor who has been over every acre of the vast tract."

So ho! Bart Tomlinson was the name of the squint man whose transit was now under lock and key at the agency! Thus Quinby made comment to himself with an elation which he was careful to keep well below the surface. He charged his memory with the name of the man who put such trust in Doctor Noisy Walk.

"Of course, Tomlinson is in on the deal, so you might suspect him of overenthusiasm," Earth continued. "But we can give you an independent appraiser in an old trader who has maintained a post on the edge of the reservation for years—a man named Hutchinson."

It was well that Quinby had time to guard against any start at the mention of his suspected friend.

"He's one of the few whites hereabouts that has any use for Indians," the real-estate man went on. "So we'll have to approach him casually, without giving him a hint of what's on hand. But that will surely add verity to the boost he's sure of giving the soil. It can be arranged easily. Old Hutchinson came originally from the State of Illinois, and so did our attorney, one Spencer W. Albright. He has made up to the trader with old-home stuff, for we hoped to be able to deal him a hand before we found that he wasn't a possibility. I'll have Albright drive you out whenever you say the word."

On account of this determining testimonial to his old friend's probity, which dissipated for all time the painful doubts voiced against his protest by Miss Flower Face Trenholm, and seemingly confirmed by Illinoi's liking for the shyster, did Quinby submit to the real-estater's handshake. His attention was forced back to the best method of delaying the proposed introductions by the sharper's insistence.

Tomlinson, the surveyor, was a newcomer and would not identify Quinby, yet he had nothing to gain by meeting him and he was constitutionally averse to playing the part of "Mr. Alexander" more often than necessary. In no circumstances could he afford presentation to Albright, who had appeared before him on behalf of Garry Todd and knew his long acquaintance with Illinoi'. He must play Indian and with conviction.

"Isn't it a cinch?" Earth prodded. "Come, what do you say?"

"It sure does look like a cinch," returned Quinby,

any assumption of sincerity made unnecessary by the question's form.

Picking his words carefully and with strict regard for the truth, he continued: "I'll stick around; that much is settled. But before you take up the matter of my participation with your associates, before you even speak to them about me, I want three or four days in which to communicate with my—my backers. Once I know how far they will go, the rest won't take long."

"Days are precious just now, Alexander." Earth obviously was trying to rise above showing his disappointment for the sake of policy. "Still, so slight a delay is reasonable. I shall do nothing, until you give the word."

With his hand on the doorknob, Quinby turned to add: "But, whatever they decide—my backers—you can count on my personal participation. I'll be in at the finish. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for giving me this opportunity."

He strode back to the hotel feeling, as the land sharper had appeared, decidedly cheered.

CHAPTER XXVII

STAR-CHAMBER TALK

THE next afternoon found Inspector Quinby in the chambers of Judge Horatio Clayton, awaiting the arrival of the train from Salt Lake on which the jurist was expected. He had seated himself far enough back from the window so that he could not be identified from the square, yet not too far to miss such passing entertainment as the small town's plaza afforded.

Beyond the scraggly looking floral bed which had been placed in the exact center of the square, its decorative effect made doubtful by the hitching-rack fence surrounding it, could be seen the show window of Charles Earth, whose name would indicate that he had been born to his calling. The shocks of corn and sheafs of wheat exhibited there seemed to be waving prize promises of the speedy garnering of other crops—of Quinby's own crop of justice in particular.

Wide as has been the field of operations, how compact, after all, were the plot seeds literally dumped before him last night by the real-estater made so guileless through his own guile! On the second-floor windows of the building immediately adjoining, half-foot lettering indicated the office of Bart Tomlinson, surveyor, alias the squint man of the case.

Before entering Quinby had noticed on the other

side of the square the professional home of Spencer W. Albright, "the Utes' best friend," if one cared to be loose with language. On a side street off the square hung the sign of Garry Todd's "Mixed Goods Emporium."

With these unworthies as absolutely involved as they were closely grouped, there seemed no chance of the failure of his mission to Rolling Stone, even were there not other resources at his command.

But the inspector, given to thoroughness in his methods, was determined to make a clean sweep of the case. He would net in, if possible, the physically active culprits who had turned his abandoned mine into a dressing room as well as these who were committing crime with their wits.

If that train would ever come, if Judge Clayton would only listen to reason—even though that reason fractured legal technicality and precedent—he could hie him forth with confidence for the baiting of his last essential trap. And that would be one he could spring with unqualified joy, now that no need remained of protecting Winona from disappointment in the parent she loved.

His tedium of waiting was diverted by a small by-play, staged in the square, which a few days before might have disturbed him emotionally. Teacher Violet Trenholm, looking trig in a duster and beflowered hat, drove on to the window-framed stage in the agency buckboard drawn by the grays.

Metaphorically feeling his own pulse, Quinby was grateful to note that his chief sensation on glimpsing her so unexpectedly was surprise—this being Friday

and a school day. What could have brought her today over the long trail?

From her subsequent movements, however, he soon deduced that nothing unwonted had caused her trip to town. Probably she had declared a holiday to replenish her dainty personal equipment in some of the shops. No undue hurry or excitement marked her descent from the high seat or the tying of her team. The duster she shook and folded away carefully under the cushion, revealing the teacher clad in a fresh blue frock. Crossing to the near-by pavement, she stopped interestedly before a millinery-window display of "Chicago's latest creations."

With the scene so prettily set, action began with the entry of a horseman from the opposite side of the square. Noting his arrival, the lady tripped back to the curb and waved a signal that he draw near. Although only a pantomime, the fact was at once recognizable to Quinby that the gallant, billed as one Arthur Mills, was none too pleased by the encounter. A voice from an unseen prompter seemed to say: "Our Artie's gray orbs have never lingered on the fair Flower Face."

Mills dismounted, however, whipped off his hat in mannerly response to the greeting of the fair, and stood for a moment in polite, if reluctant, converse. But even as he listened, a change came over him. As plainly as words, his facial expression and manner spoke the line: "Young woman, you interest me!" Soon, he not only listened, but talked in return; he seemed to be putting questions of moment to both.

In the end, the lady had her way, as such very pretty star ladies usually do. The gallant hitched

his horse and, bending over her with a show of prizing her words and her smiles, escorted her into what the audience of one knew to be an ice-cream parlor.

Quinby was still feeling his pulse, was congratulating himself that what last week might have affected him as tragedy, was to-day a farce—and an unusually amusing one, at that—when Judge Clayton bustled into his chambers.

A small bundle of nerves, the jurist showed excessive pleasure on recognizing the waiting visitor. After quieting him down into his padded-leather chair with more serious response, the inspector got at once to the object of his visit.

With the first sentence or two of his curt recital of fact, he claimed the concentrated attention upon which he had counted. He held back nothing of the case which had taxed his entire time and intelligence, from the peculiar circumstances noted by himself at the scene of the murder of Ollie Marsden down to last night's amazing, though not unexpected, disclosures by Earth. His opinion, that the young Ute under arrest was in danger of summary punishment, he supported strongly by showing how such an outrage would further the plans of the plotters.

"By heavens, Alec, you take my breath!" exclaimed Clayton at the first pause. "I hadn't an idea anything like this was back of the Indian troubles, although I realize that the whole district is pretty much wrought up. I have heard whispered complaints myself that the law was too slow. I hesitated about going up to Salt Lake for that very reason and

Frank Joseph Cechvala,
Box 540,
FBY

for the same, hurried back. What do you want me to do?"

"To hand Touching Cloud over to me!" With upraised hand Quinby checked the instantly forthcoming objection. "I'll be responsible for his welfare, and I'll have him in court whenever you call his case—if there is a case against him by the time I'm through."

Judge Clayton threw up his hands. "Man alive, you don't know what you're asking! Why, just before going to the city I exacted twenty-five hundred bail for Chalmers' appearance as star witness. He's gone to Los Angeles, but he'll be back for the trial or I don't know a dollar squeezer when I see one. But to turn the Indian over to you! Do you think I am the law? There are forms proscribed by statute which——"

"What are statutes between friends, Horatio?" Quinby interrupted ingratiatingly. "I'm not up in them enough to cite a loophole big enough to drag the Cloud through, but there must be one."

"It would be most irregular—most irregular!" the jurist insisted.

But there was a waver in his tone which, to the inspector's quick ear, spoke encouragement.

"Maybe we'd better drag in something Federal-like," he suggested cheerfully. "How's this: 'Alexander Straight-talk Quinby, duly sworn inspector of the United States Indian Bureau, demands the custody of the person of one Touching Cloud, government ward and normal resident of the Rolling Stone reservation. Said A. S. Quinby agrees to produce said T. Cloud in county court at Circle Center when-

ever said court demands it.' Won't that save your black robe and the county the smirch of a necktie party? Here, I'll put it in writing!"

The judge, however, possessed himself of the quill desk pen.

"Better let me put it into form," he advised. "We don't require so many 'saids,' and your John Hancock at the end will suffice. Of course not a line of it will be regular, but——"

"But quite according to Hoyle!"

"Anyway, it'll take the strain off Sheriff Foley, who's worried sick over the responsibility," added the judge.

Within a few minutes he had penned a formal demand for the relinquishment of the prisoner into Federal custody, which Quinby signed. Then, after the document had been duly filed in the office safe, he wrote another—a court order, this, directing the sheriff to deliver Touching Cloud forthwith. The "most irregular" asked and granted, the two shook hands on its justice.

"If I wasn't sure of your courage, Alec," Clayton voiced his last qualm, "if I doubted your nerve——"

"Haven't I just given you super-superlative proof of my nerve? Why doubt it?"

"Get along with you before you think of asking me to give you Lady Justice from atop the courthouse cupola for a watch charm!" Nervous, but genial, the little man shoved the tall one to the door.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A HOUSE OF CARDS

THE success of his daring appeal to his judicial friend had come easier than Quinby could have hoped; but he did not flatter himself unduly over the parting tribute to his courage. The fact that Clayton himself had heard the tapping of the underground and was disturbed lest the accomplishment of a lynching defile the county's honor undoubtedly had much to do with the ultimate disregard of form. Nor did he minimize the professional risk which the jurist had taken in his behalf. Impeachment proceedings would not be unlikely if there were any slip-up as a result of the star-chamber session he had just quitted; a scandal that would spell Clayton's political ruin would certainly follow.

Of course there were certain precautions which must not be overlooked. One of these prevented his going directly to the jail, presenting his order, and taking over the prisoner at once. He wanted no pack at his heels as they rode out of town—he and the tall son of a chief—when an hour or two would bring them the blanket of night.

There were, also, small details of preparation. His charge must have a mount capable of keeping pace with Red Bill and a gun in case they should stumble into a brush with the enemy. He himself must change from the store clothes, which had served him so well, into the rougher togs of the range.

He had attended the first two of these and was approaching the last when there happened that which he had miraculously avoided ever since arriving in town—the meeting up with some one he did not want to encounter. Plump into Sandy Mills he ran just outside the Gun Sight's hospitable door. From the way the young man was standing, meditatively rubbing his beardless chin, and from the start which he gave on recognizing who had almost bumped into him, the inspector surmised what shortly proved to be the truth.

"I've been combing the town for you, old flea. What's the idea of all this secrecy—keeping your name off the register, having Oscar allow that he hadn't seen you but would durn well like to and all that? The boys said you didn't make any bones about where you were heading when you left Star Square yesterday."

"Never like to be a society item when I hit a mee-tropolis," Quinby tried to side-step, but without success, as he realized from the look of those fine, gray orbs at the moment sizing him up attentively, from low-cut tan shoes to fedora.

It was now Mills' turn to jump to conclusions. "Ha, the light begins to dawn!" he exclaimed. "I shouldn't think you would want to advertise in the circumstances. At that, I reckon you're making the wisest possible move."

"Light? Circumstances? Just what move meets your approval? Quinby was honestly puzzled, as well as annoyed. But he warned himself that he must play the game with civility.

Mills laughed in a way positively gleeful. "The

light of city clothes; the circumstance of your finding the atmosphere of Rolling Stone unhealthy; the move of your immediate departure from the troubled zone."

"So-ho, you think I'm going to vamose?"

"You should go into the mind-reading game, Quinby. But don't think I'm blaming you. For my own part I am glad, and with no disrespect to you. As head of the L. and O., I have felt a positive responsibility for your safety out there. I was afraid you would never get wise to the fact that the Utes are no longer your friends or the friends of any white. I sent you a warning, you may remember, but when you didn't respond or even acknowledge receipt thereof, I feared you would go blundering along in your mistaken philanthropy until one of those murdering Indians potted you. Then I would have had a bag of trouble dumped onto my back!"

"Much obliged for your worry over me, and I came to your ranch yesterday with that receipt acknowledgment," the inspector said in a more effusive tone than usual. "About that plan of yours to trace the Marsden murderers by giving them a chance to spend money, I just couldn't arrange——"

"Don't you apologize for that, old fellow," cut in Mills. "Naturally you see things as you see them. Anyhow, I passed that up long ago for a better plan of smoking them out. You skip along to happier fields of official endeavor and consider the Rolling Stone situation as good as settled. Any word you want to send back to the folks on the mesa—I'll be riding that way in a day or two."

"Can't think of any word I want to send, thanking you"

Mills laughed again as his fingers lifted to a readjustment of his bright scarf. "Reckon there isn't anything much to say—in the circumstances. Our loss will be the gain of Blackfoot or Sioux, I suppose. Well, if you're sure there isn't a single service I can do you, I'll be off to the ranch. It has been quite an experience to know you, inspector, and I hope we shall meet again."

"We shall. I feel that in my bones."

No smile twitched the corners of Quinby's mouth, with the assurance he had made himself do the most self-controlled deed of his life. He had stretched out his hand to meet the proffered clasp of Our Artie.

"Good-by, then, and good luck!" said Mills with increasing heartiness.

"Same to you!"

There echoed in Quinby's mind "Same to you!" as he stood for a moment watching the athletic stride with which the peace volunteer swung across the plaza to where his horse was tied. Good luck to both of them—was that likely to be?

He reckoned he could hazard a guess on the language of flowers that would not be far wrong, he assured himself, as he swung up the steps of the hotel. The fair Violet must have described his attentions to Winona pretty graphically at that ice-cream festival for two, to make Mills of the Gods so glad to see his rival dressed up in going-away clothes. Come to consider it, he ought to pin a medal on that particular suit. It had made him look like ready money to the fertile Mr. Earth last night,

and to-day had postponed yet a little longer that scrap at which the Beloved Brat had begged that she be present.

When again he left the hotel, he was togged for the trail, and his swing across the plaza was as confident as Mills' had been just before dark. At the corner next above the jail, he noted that William and a second well-muscled mount were tied to the public rack, as per instructions.

Quinby entered the sheriff's office, which was also that of the jail, and came upon a semisomnolent official—the sheriff himself. When a chair had been shaken down to normal, one Foley arose to inquire his business. The court order presented and read, a troubled look invaded the face above the starred vest.

"You come for Touching Cloud the—the murderer?" came the halting and somewhat superfluous question.

"He's called for in the order, isn't he?" snapped Quinby. "And it can't be a question of my identity as recipient, for surely you remember me, Foley."

"It ain't that, inspector; not that at all. What I was trying to figure out is how I can give you a critter what ain't been tried."

"The judge has passed on that; your only duty is to turn the buck over to Federal custody."

The sheriff seemed suddenly to reach a decision. "Come along, then," he said, and took from the wall a wire hoop that held a number of keys.

Quinby followed him into an old-fashioned cell corridor, with sheet-iron walls and a small grating in each door. Arrived at the last number—which was

seventeen—the sheriff adjusted a key and tried to open the door.

"Dod blast this rusted jail!" he exclaimed on failure. "In or out, them cell doors won't never work."

"Let me try," suggested Quinby, removing the pudgy official and placing a shoulder against the refractory portal.

The door opened after some tax upon his finger muscles, and he stepped into the cell. But just inside he stopped, a chill spreading through his being. "Why—why—what does this mean?" Fiercely he turned back to the sheriff.

That worthy returned to his glare the flaccid smile of an ill-timed joke at another's expense.

"It means," he said, "that we're all out of clouds to-day. Use your own eyes. Can't you see that the sky is clear?"

Enraged for the moment almost beyond his control, Quinby caught him by the shoulder and shook him. "Clear? Are you drunk or just plain numskull? You take me straight to the cell of that Ute that the court order calls for, or I'll—I'll——"

"Reckon you'll have tuh, then!" Sheriff Foley waggled his head dolefully. "This here was the cell of the Cloud up to last night."

"Then he——"

"He's gone."

Gone! As Quinby's carefully built plan crumpled about him like a house of cards, he groaned aloud.

CHAPTER XXIX

OMINOUS INFORMATION

SOME time during the night, the third of his absence, Alec Quinby returned to the agency. Yet he slept only a few hours. Arising before the Revells were astir, he cooked his own breakfast. At the stable, he ignored William's whinnied attest of willingness for further service and saddled one of the government animals, that his horse, at least, might have the rest needed for the strenuous work which portended.

His early-morning ride took him in the direction of Hutchinson's, but he skimmed the rim of the cup, rather than descend into it and all the attractions it held. Now that he knew one man whom "the Beloved" was *not* going to marry, he felt disinclined to see her until he knew certain other things about a man whom, later on, she just possibly might.

The very fact that he had come to think of her as the Beloved—just that, without the Brat—made it safer and better for him to find out why alone. The truth was that Quinby, so quick about inspecting the minds of others, was just a bit slow about his own.

But in this case, he preferred to be slow. Always had he plumed himself on never making the same mistake twice. He controlled his present inclination in this wise. He had made an egregious mistake in

the object of his first romantic interest; from ominous signs, he knew that Winona was to be the second. Therefore he must be slow and careful—must make no mistake either as to her or himself.

He had in addition to these somewhat subtle reasons for avoiding the trading post; others of a sterner sort. He could not answer questions that morning, must not risk weakening his mood by listening to the advice of any who might influence him. The moment was too crucial for doubt or readjustment of his plans. To hope to save the day, he must be strong, grim, straight as a die in action as well as talk.

So it was the wikiup of White Leaf that marked his first objective. A long parley he held with the old chieftain; one calculated to renew the leader's confidence in his unflagging activities in the natives' behalf. Before departing, he managed an aside with Daybreak which, he was glad to see, lightened the pain in her fawnlike eyes.

The first hour of the afternoon found him headed for the allotment of Push Ahead, a visit of reassurance which he deemed necessary in view of all that had happened during his trip to the county seat. It was the twang of a bow from a trailside clump of buck brush that startled him from odd miles of thought. A feathered arrow flashed before his eyes and brought up, with a businesslike thud, in the trunk of a spruce on the far side of the trail.

"Ambushed again?" Quinby asked himself, as he whirled the government nag and spurred him straight into the brush.

The small, half-clad Indian figure, flushed by this

defiant move, darted from cover and streaked like a frightened rabbit into a near-by thicket. By the time Quinby's mount had forged a way through, the boy was in galloping flight astride a bag-of-bones pony. Had not the general direction been his own, the inspector might have forgone pursuit, with a shrug for the hostile intention. As it was, he put the horse to it.

Over the fine stretch of black gramma ahead he gained steadily, despite the Indian's belaboring efforts to increase the pony's speed. But his real interest in the chase was aroused when he observed a scrub-timber tract dead ahead. Evidently this was the fugitive's hope; for, once gaining it, he would have every chance of escaping the reprimand which the official wished to administer.

For half a mile it was touch and go. Had the distance been greater there need have been no doubt of the issue. With the wood lot approaching at every bound, however, the red fledgling became an odds-on favorite.

Quinby tried the effect of a couple of shots in the air, but they did not excite the pursued further than to send back defiant catcalls. Really to aim at the boy was, of course, out of the question. Nor had the inspector the heart to bring down the pony, as he could have done with ease. It looked as though the half clad would win by a margin of yards, when the man's hand, returning from scabbarding his gun, brushed the lariat that hung from the saddle horn.

It took but a moment to loosen this, free the noose with a few well-calculated whirls about his head, then send it rippling ahead as if of its own

impulse. The rope settled about the Indian's slender shoulders; Quinby's mount, range-trained, did the rest. Lightly as a plucked feather, the pursued was lifted from his seat and deposited upon the grass. A quick rush brought the inspector within handgrips just as his captive got out a knife and slashed at the bonds.

"Hen's teeth! If it isn't Spotty!"

Beyond a doubt, Quinby recognized in the young miscreant the freckled schoolboy from whom Miss Trenholm had lifted the war club that first day of his return to the agency.

"What gave you the idea that my mission in life was to play target for your bum markmanship—say?" he asked.

"Another time I shall not miss," came the defiant answer in Ute.

"To make sure there won't be another time, I've a mind to put you over my knee," Quinby returned, laughing in spite of himself at the uncorked, frothing rage of the embryo brave. "What do you suppose Miss Flower Face will say if I tell her of your latest attempt at murdering a fellow citizen!"

"You tell her quick a-plenty," came Spotty's snarled reply in the tutored tongue. "I go not again to school."

Quinby's interest was distracted from the menace of this suggestion by the sight of a pouch made fast to the young malefactor's breechclout. A notched stick protruded from it—a stick with a meaning all its own. His quick reach for the bag precipitated a struggle, wildcat fierce while it lasted, but accomplishing its possession. Opening the canvas sack, he

found other notched sticks exactly like the one which first had attracted his attention.

"Invitation sticks!" he commented. "You tell me, Spotty, who is giving the party?"

As the young Ute defied his authoritative tone by sullen silence, the inspector resorted to deduction. The twigs, fresh cut, were recognizable as invitations which Spotty had been in the act of distributing. Further detail was not to be read by a white man's eyes.

He considered a moment, trying to place the messenger's family. Then he remembered the schoolma'am's having named Spotty as the son of Useless. And Useless was forced, because of loans unpaid and overdue, to make himself exceedingly useful as slave to Doctor Noisy Walk.

"I see it all now, Spotty," Quinby said with a confidential grin. "You were just trying to point my attention with that arrow. It passed too close, and you were too plumb scared to hand out my invite. Beg your pardon and much obliged."

To the boy's apparent amazement, Quinby returned the pouch and, yanking him to his feet, gave him a gentle but suggestive shove toward the pony. Indeed, the inspector's behavior might well have surprised wiser heads than Spotty's. Yet Quinby, as he rode back to the trail, looked considerably cheered by the encounter.

A change of course in time took him past the habitation of Noisy Walk, but one comprehensive glance told him that this was not to be the scene of the festivities. There was not a soul in sight, either here or at the camp of Useless, nearer the dry creek

bed. The white-man house was wide open as usual, but occupied only by the bathtub. A glance within the wikiup told that the doctor had gone for some extended visit; it was stripped of the old dandy's personal effects.

On his arrival at Push Ahead's, certain by-the-way surmises were confirmed; not by the subchief himself, but by a most doleful Mary Merry, who already had set about the gruesome rites of Ute mourning by cutting off her hair. A first glance at her convinced Quinby that the news of the disappearance from the Circle Center jail must have reached the reservation and been accepted by the Cloud's family in its most drastic sense.

Halting her wails was a man-sized job. After taxing his ingenuity to the utmost, when just about ready to give up, he persuaded her into an exchange in the native tongue.

"All is over," he translated her plaint. "My son, who so grandly touched the clouds, is dead by now from the white man's rope. We have had the word from our friend, the good law man who tried, but could not save him from our enemies."

"Albright, the shyster, playing both ends against the middle to earn his pony fee!" Quinby made angry comment to himself.

Meanwhile the grief-wrung mother returned again to paroxysms of grief that must have touched the stoutest heart. His best efforts to comfort, to reassure her, seemed only to mix resentment against him with her woe. But he gleaned from disconnected mutterings the information that Push Ahead had

started with all other braves of the tribe for a conference at Medicine Bowl.

Quinby sprang to his feet, having accomplished the object of his ride. He need speculate no longer; now he knew.

The clap had struck. The Utes had taken their first stride toward the warpath. The Circle Center clique had used to the utmost effect the disappearance of Touching Cloud!

Yet these ominous considerations, whose problematical consequences none could have weighed more accurately than he, seemed only to strengthen him, upon whom had been thrust such a load of official responsibility. Absorbed in thought, he let the government nag take his time along the trail that led back to the agency. For a mile or so their even going scarcely startled the sage hens; farther along he turned for comfort to his pipe, as if all time, all safety, lay before him.

Not until he arrived at the agency, and had stabled his horse, and entered the house for supper did he show any sign of excitement. There a titbit of news, seemingly inconsequential as compared with that gathered on his ride, broke his calm.

"Ain't it just too sad about Violet!" Mrs. Annie added to her greeting. "Oh, haven't you heard? Her mother's on her deathbed up in Salt Lake, and the poor girl's almost beside herself."

"Her mother?" exclaimed Quinby in an indignant voice. His words which might have been amplified into: "And all this time she's had me pitying her because she was an orphan!" A moment or so he

thought; then he added : "How did the word get to her out here?"

"She's heard in a letter that her mother was sick, and went to town Friday afternoon especially to make arrangements, so that any really alarming news could be sent out regardless of cost. A messenger arrived a couple of hours ago, and the dear girl's already on her way."

"Alone?"

"I hope not. You see, Custer let her have the buckboard with the understanding that she'd stop at Hutchinson's and get Winona to drive in with her, so that she could bring the grays back. Custer would have gone with her himself, except that I get these timid spells, you know. Ever since I was a child I've been addicted to——"

But even artless, fat Annie saw that she had lost her audience. The inspector had doffed the leisurely manner of his return, as if all surplus time had suddenly been snatched from him. Knowing Winona, the obliging little cuss, he had no doubt of her response to such a call for help, or her forgetfulness of any past unpleasantness with the little schoolma'am. That Miss Trenholm, who was expecting just such a message, had not made the bearer wait to act as her escort back to town seemed significant. Nor did Quinby need any explanation of Revell's shifted responsibility.

With no word of the trouble that was brewing upon the reservation, he asked Mrs. Annie to make him a couple of sandwiches for en-route consumption and strode into the office.

"You've got to hit the trail with me, Revell," he

said. "Make one jump out of that smoking jacket and unlimber your trustiest gun. We've got to overtake those women before they get to the Corkscrew."

The small agent, who had risen on his superior's precipitate entry, grasped the edge of the desk to steady himself. "But Annie?" he cried. "Some sort of disturbance is threatening to break out among the Indians, I hear. You know, ever since childhood she's been addicted to nervous spells. I don't want to—I can't leave her alone."

"The Utes already have gone out, but they won't head in this direction. Annie needn't be alone; I'll assign the policemen to stand guard, even though it doesn't seem necessary. The agency will be quiet as a churchyard to-night."

"But isn't a husband's place by his wife's side?"

"A man's place is out in front. Come, hurry up! I'll have the horses at the porch in five minutes."

Evidently considering the detail settled, Quinby started for the barn. On the way he instructed the policemen as to the night guard. They were to permit any one to leave without challenge, but none to approach unless known to be friends.

Although Quinby was one of the swiftest men around a horse in the country, several minutes over the time named had elapsed before he came out with Red Bill and Revell's own mount. The agent was waiting at the porch, almost cheerful through some miraculous operation performed upon his natural timidity.

"A man's place is out in front"—that sentence had, in truth, readjusted his whole Benedict-blunted point

of view. He was ahead of Quinby as they started off with a rush.

Ten minutes after this departure, a third horseman, unchallenged by the Indian orderlies according to instruction, left the stable and dusted the trail toward the north.

CHAPTER XXX

IN DISGUISE

CUSTER REVELL needed all his painfuly acquired equestrian skill to hold saddle while his horse kept pace with the rested William on the mad ride that followed. He pinched leather shamelessly and had no attention to spare to put the many questions about the sudden sortie which puzzled him. During their momentary halt at Hutchinson's he did not dismount, as did the inspector with one precipitate fling, but utilized the time to advantage regaining his breath.

Quinby entered the store with a rush that brought the old trader to his feet. "Where's Winona?" he asked.

"What's all the hulla-hulla, Alec? You act like you was in a hurry. Nona? Why, she's gadded off to town; so you might spare a moment for somebody what you've been neglecting of late."

More impatient than before at this collapse of his one small hope that certain "primping" operations associated with a feminine trip to town would enable him to prevent the start, he rasped out his complaint: "You let her go?"

"*Let* her go—*the Brat?* I sure did, and why not? Outside of the fact that her company was an act of mercy to the scary little schoolma'am, I'm right glad to have my girl in town for a spell. Since the T. C.

business, the Utes have grown so dog-goned restless there's no telling what they'll do. I told her to bide a week with her friends down there."

"But such a drive in the night——"

"Nona can take care of the two of them," Hutchinson interrupted; "she's got her gun, ain't she?"

Reminding himself that the trader lacked his inside knowledge of the particular liabilities of tonight, Quinby put the question which, after all, was the only vital one: "How long since the start?"

"Oh, nigh onto half an hour, I should say," returned Illinoi' after a deliberate consultation of the heavy silver watch he wore—one noted for keeping time sometimes, and sometimes not. "'Pears to me, son, you must have something downright pressing to say to the girl or——"

He left the wink-embellished remark unfinished on discovering that he was talking to himself; the inspector had gone.

Their only chance of overtaking the buckboard and the two girls lay in a dash over a rough, short-cut trail that met the wagon road just before it went over the top into the interstices of Corkscrew Climb. Once they were out of the cup, Quinby guided William into this. After a word of caution to Revell to "hold tight and keep a-coming," they were off on a sprint which the latter, at least, would never forget.

To Quinby's ears, the rattle of wheels had, for the nonce, become the most melodious sound in the scale. Faintly at first he caught it as their break-neck ride brought them to the road. Evidently the girls had just passed. But a moment more and they sighted the team.

"'Lo, Nona! Alec coming. Hold your horses!"

Not wishing to frighten them in the semidarkness of the night, he bellowed the announcement on the way and was relieved to see that his voice carried well enough for compliance. As he drew up alongside, he noticed that the little pard, true to that boasted ability for taking care of herself, held her gun ready against a possible ventriloquist trick.

"Who's following you?" she asked with further caution, as she heard the second horse pounding along.

"Only Custer Revell, for once on the job."

Winona turned to her seatmate.

"Some attentions we're getting to-night—a musketeer apiece, one for each!"

"Hurry, dear, hurry!" Although low spoken, Quinby heard the schoolma'am's protest.

"What's up, Alec? We haven't a minute if Violet catches her train. Haven't you heard? It's a case of life and death."

"There's too much up that shouldn't be for explanationing if anybody's in a hurry," he returned. "But are you sure you folks are?"

Miss Trenholm straightened in her seat and addressed him directly. "My mother is on her deathbed in Salt Lake," she said curtly. "Your facetiousness, inspector, is most untimely."

"Beg pardon, ma'am," Quinby removed his hat as if accepting the rebuke, then added, with a chuckle in his voice: "At that, you're a lucky *orphan*—most don't have mothers!"

"Alec Quinby, what's come over you?" Winona's demand was indignant as, freeing one arm, she

clasped it around the sobbing little creature who had slumped against her side.

"This has come over me good and strong—Corkscrew isn't safe traveling for a pair of young women alone on this particular night," he answered. "Don't want to delay you under the sad circumstances that Miss Flower Face has just recited, and we won't lose any time if you and she will just change craft with Revell and myself."

Winona started and loosened her grip on the schoolma'am to peer up into Quinby's face. The look of him, his words, his voice—all were authoritative commands from one whom she had learned to trust implicitly since childhood.

"You want us to board your horses—you to drive the wagon?" she asked.

"You get the idea, first guess!" Dismounting as if still in a considerable hurry, he reached up a hand to help her from the rig. "In addition, you'll please me by keeping a hundred yards in the rear."

Putting scarce a pound's weight upon his arm, Winona sprang to the ground.

Miss Trenholm, however, asserted herself. "I don't care to ride horseback," she said, "I'm in far too great a hurry for any impractical joking. All this is perfectly ridiculous. Get back in, Winona. You promised, you know, to——"

She finished with a small shriek. One of Quinby's long arms had shot out, circled her waist, lifted her bodily and deposited her upon the ground.

"Sorry to contradict a lady so forcefully," he observed, "but for the moment, might is right."

"You—you brute!" she screamed.

"Please give Revell your hat and duster," was the soft answer that did not turn away her wrath.

When she protracted her response unduly by hysterical cries, alternate stamping of her small feet, and a feline struggle against his offices, Quinby withdrew the pins from her beflowered headgear and himself effected the change.

"Brute—brute!" she insisted when she was forced out of the garment requisitioned. "Is the man mad?" she whispered to Revell, as he helped her into the saddle which, on order, he had just vacated.

As for Winona, it happened that she had worn her new velvet hat, acquired on her recent trip to town from that "Latest Chicago Creations" shop. Life did not seem so much to her, but to risk that hat! It was a tribute indeed to Quinby that she took it off, although just a bit grudgingly, and handed it over to aid in the inexplicable camouflage which he was directing. She needed no help in mounting Red Bill, who was a friend of hers.

The inspector went around to the heads of the grays, spoke to them confidentially and patted their muzzles by way of letting them know, as well as the girls, just who was in command. All orders given, adorned in the toque and Winona's heavy driving cape, he sprang in beside the rather giddy figure of the agent.

"We'll take the descent at a walk," was his parting word to the rear. "Be sure to keep your distance, now! If you hear shooting ahead, draw up at the side of the road and wait until we come back for you. All aboard!

Winona broke discipline to spur up beside him.

"Why didn't you tell me there was going to be a gun fight?" she cried. "Let me change places with Custer. I can shoot and hit!"

"Not on your life!" The agent's vehement interruption brought surprise to all. "My place is out in front with the inspector."

Quinby turned to peer at the little misfit through the night gloom before answering, as if in admiration of sentiment he never had heard before. "Right he is, Nona! The firing line is for us men."

He clucked to the team, and the buckboard moved on.

CHAPTER XXXI

OVER THE TOP

"YOU expect there'll be shooting?" Custer asked in a whisper, as they left the open spaces of the mesa for the deeper shadows of the winding trail.

Quinby wrapped the reins around his left hand and drew his gun with the other. "Any minute now," he said. "Don't let it worry you; they'll be trying their best not to hit us. But we haven't any call to spoil our records, so blaze away—and blaze to scorch—from the minute they start."

"They? Do you mean that the Indians——"

Custer never finished his question. "They" chose that particular moment to rush from roadside clumps on the very turn where Ollie Marsden had cashed in and Chalmers had paid tribute so short a while before.

With a chorus of shrilling whoops, four shadowy forms appeared on four specter horses, two from either side. Straight toward the rig they dashed, a revolver salvo attesting their deadly earnestness.

At the first sound of them the man in cape and toque had stepped upon the foot brake, halting the buckboard. As the first volley sang harmlessly past his ears, he opened up in return with a vigor doubly surprising from the female he looked to be. With an imprecation, the nearer lead rider doubled up

in his saddle and his mount turned into the brush. The other, on Revell's side, evidently filled with anxiety to see what had happened to his comrade, cut across the road and also disappeared.

In the face of snap fire, returned at random, the second pair came on. Quinby's direct opponent pulled up with a tremendous war cry and reached for the bridle of one of the grays. His shoulder stopped a bullet that discouraged his further effort, for he, too, darted into cover.

The fourth, finding himself deserted and not caring evidently to attempt a road crossing in the face of double fire, attempted to brush past the buckboard on Revell's side. The agent tried a shot at him, but found his gun empty. Entirely forgetting himself, he took a flying leap from the wagon seat, seized what his hands could reach of the enemy, and dropped to earth. Like a grenadier he swore when he saw the buck he had hoped to pull down, still unhorsed, disappear into the woods the way the others had gone. Seated in the roadbed, he leaned to examine what he held in his hands.

Quinby, after peppering the brush with the contents of a fresh gun without drawing a single return shot, jumped out to make sure that no harm had befallen his companion in arms.

"Looks as if the surprise party *was* one, old-timer!" he exclaimed.

Stopping, he clapped an approving hand upon the shoulder of the small heap of man flesh in the road—the first he ever had placed there, by the way.

"See what I took, a—a scalp!" The agent's voice

sounded as weak as looked the wabble of his knees after he had got to his feet. But he held forth his trophy in triumph.

"Dinged if you didn't! Say, pardner, you're all there!"

"I guess—maybe, after all—Annie *did* marry a man." The hopeful comment upon the hitherto somewhat doubtful subject of himself must be excused Custer in view of his unwonted excitement. "It would have been more sure, though," he added, "if you hadn't told me they were firing only to scare us."

Quinby laughed grimly, as he took out a handkerchief and dabbed at a bullet burn across his neck.

"That consideration stuff," he consoled his comrade in gallantry, "only applied to the first few shots. Let's get back and ask the womenfolks to pin a medal on the grays. Didn't they stand like veterans?"

Turning the team, he drove back to the first bend in the Corkscrew, where, to his secret relief, the two sat posted according to orders.

At first glimpse of the returning buckboard, however, she who wore the Quinby sombrero rushed to meet them. But no gratitude from the savers of her life and limb had she. "I hate your whole family, Alec Quinby!" she snapped.

"Fortunately that don't go far, Nona; *I'm* a sure-enough orphan," he returned in a voice that matched his grin.

"The idea of leaving me out of a bang-up fight like that! You'll never do it again or I'll—I'll——"

"Since you're so all-fired mad about it," he inter-

rupted soothingly, "my whole family—which is just me—advises that I'd better invite you along for the finish."

As they stopped beside Miss Trenholm, Winona leaned to him. "Do you mean to say that they got away from the two of you," she asked. "All of them?"

"Some went as casualties," defended the inspector, "and Custer here took a scalp."

His last word moved the hitherto silent schoolma'am to speech. "Scalp?" she shrilled. "Were they—do you mean to tell me we were attacked by Indians?"

For answer Revell waved his feathered trophy aloft.

Quinby reached out in time to prevent the teacher's actually toppling from the saddle. Winona closed in and steadied her until he could spring from the rig and lift her into the seat.

"You'll have to drive her back to the agency and Mrs. Annie," he said. "Mother's deathbed scene is necessarily postponed."

"I'll do nothing of the kind, Alec Quinby," returned Winona. "I've taken one too many orders from you to-night."

The inspector's laugh maddened her until she grasped its meaning. "Said order was addressed to Custer, Miss Back Fire. To you personally I have the honor of extending an invitation in the name of the aforementioned whole family—again meaning me—to attend the finish relating and appertaining to this bang-up gun fight. There!"

The last word meant that he was too depleted

of words to add: "You needn't ever expect a mouthful like that from me again!"

The infuriated lines of her face relaxing in wonder, Winona rode closer to where he stood. "My new hat," she said, "if you didn't let it get shot, I might forgive you."

His head being brought by her word within easy reach, she seized her treasure, examined it with murmured gratification, and replaced it where it belonged, handing him his own hat.

"Now that you don't look so plumb funny," she said, "I think I'll condescend to accept that invite."

Shortly Revell drove off with a very limp flowering vine clinging to him for support. The two who belonged to the range turned into the first trail that led toward the north.

"Was it out of consideration for us—us incumbrances that you didn't follow the hellions?" Miss Back Fire put the question meekly enough now that they were alone. "You were a glorious smart Alec to plan everything so carefully and carry it out without a hitch. I'm over my mad now. I really think you ought to be rewarded."

Their horses were traveling comfortably close together. She leaned to peer at his profile, set straight ahead. "Why don't you say something?" she asked.

"I'm listening. I'm not ready to say anything more," he said.

"You mean, Alec, not yet?"

"Not *quite* yet."

Again he turned his profile, and this time she matched it with hers. Her voice sounded light

as she added: "I was saying that you sent those red coyotes into their holes almost as neatly as my Mills of the Gods could have done."

"Why do you say *your* Mills, Nona?"

She had only a moment to enjoy the harassed, unhappy look with which he leaned to put the question, when a dull roar startled them.

"Why—why—what is that?" she cried, clutching his arm.

For answer he spurred ahead. "She's done it! Make a hustle! We must not, *dare* not, be too late!"

At this back-flung call, Winona settled to the most utterly regardless ride of her career—this time, however, in the worth-while cause of keeping pace with Red Bill and the once-careful mentor who urged her on.

CHAPTER XXXII

MEDICINE OF TRUTH

EXPERTS with all the resources of an electrical company behind them could scarcely have gained greater illuminative effect than had the congregation of blanketed braves, or so it looked to the half-blinded eyes of the inspector and his fair stirrup-mate when at last they peered out from the dark juniper fringe about Medicine Bowl. Of bonfires there were none, and as for spotlights, the natives did not possess such facilities. But by some adroit trick with pine torches and glazed skin reflectors the natural amphitheater was clear as day, yet with a weird, phosphorescent radiance as against the panoply of night.

No need was there for Quinby to detail what he had already learned—that the Rolling Stone Utes had uprisen, and that this was their council of war. Born among them, Winona had sensed in the fullest the menace of that temporary encampment of squaws and children just outside the sacred depression; the clumped herd of running ponies, to avoid which she and Quinby had made a slight detour; the vast gathering of braves within.

Even lacking intimate knowledge of their ways, she must have recognized the martial nature of the event. There were more Indians squatted in the huge half circle than any one would have believed

the reservation supported. Uptilted among the audience, each stuck into the soft earth by the nose, were the shields of former wars, at last uncovered to brazen their sign-writ boasts of past victories. Most of the squatters were painted, and at least every other one wore a war bonnet of feathers, very similar to that scalp which Custer Revell had lately taken in the defeated attack on Corkscrew Climb.

Presiding was the venerable White Leaf, seated upon an improvised throne of skins. Through the knot of snow-white hair tied above his forehead was thrust an eagle feather. In the really remarkable illumination every detail of his grim, old face was visible—firm chin, bold nose, gentle mouth. It seemed almost that the fires of his eyes blazed across the distance.

A conspicuous member of the assemblage was Noisy Walk. He moved about among them, handing out native canteens. Quinby, hurried by the realization that these doubtless were loaded with the jimson concoction mixed for frenzy, whispered to Winona to hold her place, and stole forward to the very edge of their cover.

He saw the subchief take a long draft at a container which the doctor had offered, sprang up from his former couch of grief, and stride to the skin-covered mound on which sat White Leaf. At the edge of the official space, he turned toward the assembled braves.

"I have been silent thus far in this great council, my brothers," Push Ahead began in a broken voice, but one which carried to Quinby's ears. "The

reason you do not need to ask, but none the less I wish to tell you. The greatest of griefs that can come to the father of a splendid son has fallen upon me, and at this beginning of my old age when the years of an upright life should return their harvest of plenty. Somewhere Touching Cloud hangs by the white man's rope, slain without that make-believe of a trial which he whom he we have called Straight Talk promised, should be."

The public reception of the inspector's name boded no increase of love for the man. From out of the general rumble of invective, Quinby could distinguish enough that was specific to convince a more vain individual than himself that his present standing with this particular band of Utes was not worth quoting on the general market.

"Where is he now—this white who has claimed brotherhood with us, who has promised so much?" demanded Push Ahead. "Is he here to offer us support in this last torture inflicted upon our flesh?"

"Hold!" Noisy Walk rasped the word tellingly. "I shall send his real brothers to fetch him."

Seizing a crated box, the medicine man strode with it to a stand before the squatted circle. When he opened the lid, a dozen woodpeckers flew out and darted about dazedly in the glare of the reflected torches, then fluttered toward the gloom of junipers.

Both Quinby and Winona knew the significance attached to these birds. To a Ute the woodpecker symbolizes sin. Well for them was it that none had flown in their direction! Such a pointing would

not have escaped the natives after they knew of his presence.

Already signs could be seen that the stramonium which Noisy had served so freely was having its effect. More than one buck had sprung to his feet for a moment of wild contortion in the open space before the head chief. But White Leaf maintained his listening attitude, for Push Ahead was continuing.

"Talk is cheap, my brothers," he went on. "This we know—that we have suffered enough. Shall we stay here on the Great Mesa to be strangled by the rope as was he whose soul has gone to the sand hills? Of all his people between the waters of sunrise and sunset, the Great Father has forgotten us. His promises are empty; his words no longer breathe the truth. Let us take the trail of our ancestors, let us strike to-night into the warpaths that lead to honor and death!"

An uproar of approval burst forth. From their hunched positions many of the semicircle sprang forward to start their dance of war. Shields were snatched from the ground and spears upraised.

A shrieked announcement, however, caught the general attention: "The woodpecker—it is he himself!"

The buck Angry sprang with a cry from the front row and rushed toward the thicket, knife in hand. Out of the juniper fringe one rushed forward to meet him with equal speed. Not another moment had Quinby dared delay. In the open space they met.

"Thief of my good money, you shall pay me with

your blood of milk!" cried the frenzied Ute, but a foot from the inspector, his knife arm upraised.

Now, Alexander Quinby was noted for never having been beaten to his gun, and the bulge at his hip was evident to all who sat near; but he made no move for it. Instead, he lifted his hands and threw open his coat upon a flannel shirt already open at the neck.

"My breast is bared," he called; "why don't you strike?"

While he spoke his black eyes held the bloodshot ones below him.

Angry's whole body quivered from the struggle between his frenzy to kill and some unseen force which stayed his hand. Except for the gritting of his teeth behind his frothed lips, he uttered no word of answer.

"So-ho, Angry shows himself not so angry as he thought!" Quinby's taunt filled the lengthening moment.

Although no surface muscle showed the fact, the inspector's mind and body were both taut. Should his challenge of cowardice be answered adversely, should the knife start descent, a blow was planned and ready to send the cut-face spinning back.

But even with the eyes of the tribe upon him and the drug contesting his weakness, misnamed Angry effected only a gulp of the throat.

"I knew it would be so." Quinby distributed a smile around them. "Angry has not the evil in him to kill one whom he knows in his heart to be his friend."

With the exultation, his left shot out, not in a

blow, but to grasp the threatening wrist. Slowly, holding the savage eyes, he drew it down, and with his right removed the fingers that gripped the knife hilt. A quick fling deposited the weapon, blade quivering, in the earth at the feet of the chief. Disarmed of more than his knife, Angry slung back to his place amid the jeers of his fellows.

Quinby stared about him in frank challenge, but none stepped out to put individual courage to the test. His gaze settled upon Noisy Walk, who stood, canteen in hand and face twisted in rage, beside the still open bird crate. There came the flutter of wings, the dart of small feathered bodies. The red-headed woodpeckers returning to their cage gave the lone white among so many hostile reds his cue.

"See, the Sin Birds are back!" he cried. "They have returned to their own—the chief sinner among you. It is well."

Striding over to Noisy, he snatched the gourdlike container from his hands, upturned it, and poured its contents over the head and bonnet of him who would be chief.

"Here is the traitor among you—may his hair fall out, decayed by his own poison! This is the grass snake who has played the game of our pale-face enemies, because you would not make him a chieftain. Here is the lizard who would urge you forth to utter annihilation! Take him and bind him, I adjure you, until such a time as those wiser than we decide upon his punishment!"

Like a frenzied panther the old faker sprang at his accuser. But scarcely had Quinby been taxed to hold him off when an authoritative voice pene-

trated the uproar: "Take him, my warriors; keep him apart until we have heard the words of him who has dared enter our council!" White Leaf had risen, had spoken.

It was when Quinby began to talk peace, with that cimcumlocution needed to carry conviction to the Indian mind. Peace? There could be no peace until the death of Touching Cloud had been avenged —of that a dozen grim voices assured him.

"But if I prove to you that you have listened again to twisted tongues——" Quinby's tones rose above their denials. "If he whom you mourn as dead needs no avenging—— Give me but a moment in which to make the medicine of truth."

Something of the anxiety he felt to tell them awoke in them to hear. Gradually silence settled, held them as in a spell. Quinby had folded his arms and bowed his head. His lips moved, but not entirely for effect. The prayer he muttered to save time and the situation was from his heart.

Then slowly he lifted one hand toward a patch of light that gleamed most brilliantly just behind the head chief's diadem.

"The time is here, oh, my friend! Come forth!"

And from out of the junipers, straightening to his last proud inch as he came, clad in gala attire, his face glorified by an unreal radiance, strode the answer to their battle cry.

For a moment, a hush as if the princely dead had returned held the assembly. Superstitious minds were slow to believe. Incredulous eyes were turned away, only to shift back quickly in the hope that, after all, it might not be a white man's trick.

From the seat at White Leaf's right into which he had collapsed, Push Ahead arose and advanced with uncertain steps. Toward him moved also the apparition, with hands outstretched. Slowly, fearsomely, the older pair fluttered out and grasped them, clung to them as if never to let them go. There lifted to the frowning heavens a pæan of praise.

"My son—Touching Cloud—he is of the flesh—he lives again!"

And only bone and muscle it could have been that lifted the father's crumpled figure and bore it back to his couch of former grief.

When, a moment later, a pause came, the venerable chief turned in his public capacity to Quinby. "Your medicine is good," he said. "Of what does it consist?"

"Straight talk."

With these words, the inspector hesitated, studying the moment and the temper of the tribe. Then he continued: "Seeing will be believing in my explanation, as in the reappearance of Touching Cloud. There is reason why we should hasten to another spot. Will your people come with me?"

He had not been mistaken; both moment and mood were ripe. They would follow where he led, they declared.

CHAPTER XXXIII

NO MISTAKES

THE descent of the tribe upon the Mine of Dreams was orderly enough. Quinby did not need to tax his oratory, as he had feared. His one word "Come!" would have been sufficient. After his resurrection of their subchief's son in the flesh, the naturally trusting and mercurial souls would have followed him anywhere.

He led the way, Winona brushing stirrups on one side, Touching Cloud on the other. Just behind them rode the two chiefs, whom tribulation had made as one. Mounted on their running ponies, that had borne them to the war council, came the expectant pack of braves. In the rear straggled the women, none too weary to spare occasional attentions of an opprobrious nature for Doctor Noisy Walk, now a prisoner in earnest and bound to a travois.

"By what black magic did you produce the Cloud in that uncanny fashion?" Winona put the question as they turned into the trail which they two had followed together a few days before.

"You are even more impatient than his father, young woman."

"Shucks, I never aspired to the patience of an Indian!" There was a snap of warning in her voice that he would have to take the consequences if he kept her waiting longer.

So then he told her of the others who had heeded his straight talk—of Judge Clayton, for one, and afterward Sheriff Foley. It had been a hard jolt, after persuading his order of release from the jurist, to find the cell empty which had been occupied by the accused buck whose life was so important to his plans.

The sheriff at last had made a clean breast of it all, however, and established the fact that, fearing a descent upon the jail by the necktie party, said to be organizing, he had removed the Cloud secretly to his own home in the outskirts of Circle City.

There the inspector had taken the contested young man in charge and had ridden with him through the night to a new seclusion in the loft of the agency barn. Touching Cloud, at last free of any custodian other than his own conscience, had been the third rider along the north trail that night. To the letter of his grateful promise to make his return known in Quinby's way, he had waited until the right moment when his appearance in the flesh should be signaled.

"But the long, awful chances you took, Alec!" the girl exclaimed.

"With Touching Cloud, Straight Talk took no chance." The proud interruption came from the rescued buck himself. "He has saved me from two deaths; henceforth my life belongs to him to do with as he will."

Quinby chuckled. "That would be some responsibility. What could I do with a sky-high cloud like you, if I hadn't got a fate already picked out for you."

"But the report of a lynching—how did that get into circulation?" persisted Winona.

"Sheriff Foley handled that part of it bang-up. Maybe the Circle Center clique didn't swallow the gag that some one had beaten them to the party they planned. But they sure lost no time using the report toward the same end. Presto! we have to-night's uprising!"

Winona offered what seemed a pertinent reminder. By bringing the Cloud out instead of hiding him, you could have stopped the danger to the community before it was under way.

"But I wanted to get the braves all together at once, and your orphan friend, Flower Face, will tell you that there is no quicker way of teaching a Ute than by showing him. That's why we're all pilgriming toward the scene of that blast you heard a while back—Miss Daybreak's end of the job."

"Daybreak—the blast?"

In a flash it all came to her. Alec had known beforehand that to-night's attack on the Corkscrew was not to be the work of real Indians, but that of the miscreant whites who had turned his abandoned mine into a dressing room. He had counted on their immediate flight there, and had posted the Ute maiden with instructions to set off the blast after they had reëntered the tunnel. The rock slide would imprison them, and they would be held until he was ready to remove them to a more formal jail.

"Oh, Alec, you're so *darned* wonderful!" Winona exclaimed, for once allowing to sound in her voice the admiration which he could not see in her eyes.

"We were speaking of the lady in the case,"

Quinby said, not seeming to have heard, although thrilled by his little pard's unwonted praise. "Unless something's gone wrong with my guesses, she's hoisted a bunch of choice rogues on their own petard."

To other factors of the problem her active thoughts returned. How had the highwaymen known that she and Violet were to pass that way at such an unlikely hour? How came Alec to suspect them? What could the attack possibly have profited them, even if successful?

But the answers must be postponed, since they had reached the scene of the recent explosion.

At a whistled signal from Quinby, a slight, shadowy figure came out from the pines.

"The Day—her beauty shines through the night!" In Ute, Touching Cloud saluted his beloved softly to himself, then stoically subserved his feelings to the purpose of the trip. His eyes clung to the girl, however, as she spoke in a calm voice to Quinby.

"It is well, Straight Talk," she said. "They are shut in darkness who have dwelt in crime."

"Here is your reward, Daybreak. And here that aforementioned fate, Cloud. May you live and prosper ever afterward!"

Taking the hands of the two, the inspector united them; then pushed them aside that they might feel as alone as possible in that first, sacred moment of their happiness.

As sternly as though he had not a sympathetic impulse in his being, he began giving orders to the Ute braves who, by twos and threes, had been filtering through the gulch. First they must have

bonfires, he declared, that light be made for the work in hand. There ensued a descent upon the equipment of the squaws for axes, and soon the dry timbers of the shack were being split into material for illumination.

When three huge fires were sending into a gulch a brilliance almost rivaling that of the Bowl, he showed where the digging was to begin. A dozen pair of hands tore into the slide with improvised tools.

That they did not know why they were exerting themselves had no diminishing effect on the energy of these original Americans, so ready for war or peace. Straight Talk wanted something dug out; that was enough. In the span of minutes, the yawning edge of the tunnel mouth began to show.

After picking a firing squad from braves he knew, Quinby stationed them with rifles in a semicircle about the opening. Clearly he explained to them that capture, not slaughter, was desired, and warned them not to fire unless he should declare the need. They stared at him with wondering grunts, for not a sound had come from within the mine.

The inspector approached the opening. Making a megaphone of his hands, he called inside. In five minutes, he informed the responseless interior, a boulder would be pried away, making an opening large enough for one man to crawl through at a time. If there happened to be any person or persons inside who desired to get out and surrender to him, they might do so after throwing out their guns. He allowed that there should be two weapons for each man, and added the information that the

mine was surrounded by Utes who would not hesitate to shoot on his command.

He offered the word of Alexander Straight-talk Quinby that any who gave himself up according to program would be taken comfortably under arrest to Circle City for trial without manhandling.

Leaning close, he listened for some seconds, but heard neither acceptance nor refusal of his suggestion. Stepping back beside Winona, he signaled the bucks who were above the tunnel crack. At once they inserted a lever behind the obstructing boulder and pried it away. True enough, a hole was cleared sufficiently large for any normal figure to wriggle through.

Minutes of waiting elapsed, filled with curiosity for most, but with tense expectation for Quinby. His trap had been sprung according to plan, but how could he be sure of the conduct of his game? Would the scoundrels, realizing the hopelessness of their situation, prefer the mercy of earth to that of man? Would they come out and give themselves up, or would it be necessary to smoke or starve them into submission? The issue was sure enough. Eventually they would have to yield. But certain matters needing his immediate attention at the county seat made him anxious to have this performance over without delay.

"Here come my shooting irons!" announced a muffled voice, at last followed by the pattering on the shale of a pair of Colts.

Succeeding them, the head and shoulders of a man emerged from the hole, only to be withdrawn

turtlewise after one glance at the paint-daubed reception committee.

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed the muffled voice. "Say, out there! I ain't going to crawl out and be massacred to boot. If that there was Inspector Quinby shouting, leave him show himself."

Quinby started obligingly forward, but Winona laid a detaining clutch upon his arm. "It may be a trick to get you under fire," she cautioned him.

"Not from that gopher," he reassured her. "He saw the firing squad. Besides, he's got the pulled-out tweak in his voice of a man who's had enough."

He stepped to the opening and reached within. "Come out, Short Cake; here's my hand on it!"

The hand was grasped, and next moment the fat cook from the Star Square Ranch scrambled out, a touch-and-go fit that must have scraped his shoulders. As Quinby had predicted, there was no fight in him. He even offered his wrists for the rope which one of the bucks had ready.

"I'm surprised, Shorty," remarked the chief of ceremonies, "that so good a cook as you should be so bad."

"Well, this ain't exactly my regular line," the best culinary artist "west of the Pecos" returned with a weary grin; "but sometimes I get ambitious above making biscuits."

"Way clear for second candidate!" The inspector had stepped back to his stand beside Winona.

Two more revolvers were flung out, then a whined plea: "I'm wounded, so don't you get rough with me!"

Forthwith Scarlet, pale of face as he ever was

likely to be, dragged himself into the open as fast as he could with his right arm dangling.

The third man to follow his gun was Sam Monday, also wounded, but hurling invective right and left. It was the appearance of Lofty Dougherty that really startled Winona, for the others she never had seen before.

"I know that last man," she exclaimed to Quinby. "He's—he's been employed as foreman on Mills' ranch. He must have been using his berth there to keep track of Sandy's law-and-order activities. Oh, but this will be a blow for him!"

Dougherty got to his feet and stared about him, holding off the buck who advanced to rope him. When his eyes found Quinby, his lips moved to protest.

"What's the meaning of this outrage, inspector?" he demanded. "It's a pity if four white fellows can't hole in for a quiet game of draw without being set upon by a pack of murdering red bucks. I'll hold you accountable for——"

"Enough of that lofty stuff," interrupted Quinby. "As a member of the L. and O. in good standing, as you admitted yourself the other day, you ought to know that sort of razzoo won't get you far with me."

The brief reminder seemed to have a discouraging effect. "I reckon this ain't no place to argue," he muttered. "Now that you've got us all out, what are you going to do with us?"

As Quinby stood, seemingly considering his next move, he felt a tug at the tail of his coat and turned to find Daybreak on tiptoes with a whisper for

him: "There may be another. As they rush in, I think I count five."

"You likely counted right," he agreed and returned to Dougherty. "Your second bluff is as empty as the first. We'll start for Circle when the fifth hand is laid on the table, to borrow the terms of your lie. I'm a pretty good counter myself, and there were more than four of you shooting stars at the ranch. Who's the other—Pedro or the sickly one?"

Dougherty reiterated his assertion that no one remained in the tunnel, and appealed to his fellows for support of his statement. Scarlet and Monday obliged. But Short Cake stood chuckling rather fatuously to himself, although what he could find amusing in his predicament was not visible to Quinby's eyes.

"Suppose then," he addressed Dougherty, "that you and I make a little trip of investigation. Into the tunnel with you; I'll follow!"

But Lofty would not incline his tall frame toward the opening. "There ain't no use going back," he muttered. "I don't dare—— Anyhow, I can't see as there's any use——"

"So-ho!" Quinby treated himself to a grin. "There *is* another, then? Better luck than I expected. You wireless your friend, Lofty, that the jig is up. I'll give him five minutes to crawl out or stay in, plumb perpetual. These bucks can seal that tunnel tighter than if I had never calloused my hands driving it. Likely he feels more tender-hearted toward you than me. You tell him."

As Dougherty recounted this ultimatum into the tunnel, Short Cake beckoned to the inspector. "Would

you mind explanationing to me, boss," he said, "how the Sam Hill you was able to pick in the dark the two that lay for you at Cherry Bush Creek for winging in the late unpleasantness with them females what weren't?"

Quinby treated himself to another grin. "What was the general idea of that Cherry Bush plant—did they think they could scare me off this range?"

"You see, boss, that was afore I'd met you to them proper. They didn't know you then, and that's a fact."

Dougherty got up from the shale, brushing his trousers. "You win the hand," he said to Quinby. "He'll come out."

This time announcement was made by the violet appearance of three guns—perhaps to attest the absoluteness of surrender. From out of the hole emerged slowly a handsome head, a splendid pair of shoulders, a well-knit, well-dressed figure.

"I salute you and the circumstance of your creation, O conqueror!" In the mock extravagance of Winona's greeting on that first day, Arthur Mills bent low before him.

But there sounded a cry which upset the calm of both conquered and conqueror: "Artie—you!"

The one turned, startled, to look; the other dropped forward his head and shuddered. Off guard from the stab at his heart of the girl's cry, Quinby did not see the lightning change from nonchalance to blind rage in his foe.

"You dog! so you had to bring her to see you get me! Well, you've gone too far. She'll see me get you and finish you, if it's the last——"

The snarls issued from Mills as he crouched, then rushed regardless of the rifles that covered him. But not one of the guns spoke. The eyes of the squad were on him who had not yet given the command to kill.

And Quinby did not give it. With a heavy lunge to one side he threw off the dead weight that lunged down over the shale. The next moment he was able to shoot out a fist blow that caught his adversary just behind the car and sent him down in a heap; and just in time it was to save the ranchman's life for punishment to come.

Angry had forgotten orders, had begged Quinby's pardon for his frenzy at the Bowl in the language of his gun.

For the master mind behind the troubles of the Utes was gone; the jig was up!

CHAPTER XXXIV

AT THE FINISH

DURING the minutes in which the Mine of Dreams remained the stage of the nightmare, Alexander Quinby was too busy to glance the way of her who he believed would suffer chiefly by the dénouement.

Once the archculprit was bound, he turned to White Leaf with a request for the services of the best mounted brave among the Utes. On the designation of Charley Horse, he wrote with characteristic brevity upon a page torn from his memorandum book:

SHERIFF FOLEY: Serve warrants.

QUINBY.

That was all. At top speed, the buck made off toward the punishment of the Circle Center clique. Before dawn of another day the population of the county jail would be increased, on warrants to which the inspector had already sworn. Charles Earth, the real-estate man to whom had been intrusted the financing of the vast land robbery; Bart Tomlinson, whose surveying activities had provided the first hint of what lay behind the troubles of the upwhipped Utes; Spencer W. Albright, the shyster lawyer from Illinois who had put over his last double cross;

and Garry Todd, assigned as "planter" of those crisp new bills from the Chalmers' loot, would be among those present.

Considered with the sextet he had in hand and the two he expected to surprise at Star Square Ranch on the way to town, his clean-up at last seemed very clean.

Through Short Cake, who evidently saw safety in in service, the horses of the white renegades were located and commandeered. As Quinby was turning away to post a guard over the abandoned mine until the district attorney could collect the disguises and other evidence exhibits within, the cook recalled him to speak a word in his own behalf regarding the attack on them females—a lengthy word which confirmed a certain shrewd conjecture in Quinby's mind.

The cook offered further confirmation on another point—why Ollie Marsden had been murdered when he also was a crook. As the inspector had thought, the jitney driver had penetrated the disguise of one of the holdup party and as he did not belong, this had made his immediate finish necessary to their safety.

That Touching Cloud insisted upon a single-handed roping of Noisy Walk in his saddle for the trip to jail next interested the inspector. He drew near to ask why.

"Is he not the evil grass snake—the cause of my own trouble?" the young brave cried. "Had I not met him on a near-by trail that unlucky morning when there had fled from my heart the last bright hope of Daybreak, all would have been otherwise. The

twisted-tongue viper, to declare that he, too, had been rejected—to propose that we forget in drink our common grief! And had it been only fire water in his canteen—but a few swallows and I realized no more until I awoke and found myself arrested by the white man's law and held, for what I knew not."

The group of prisoners having been made ready for hard travel, each tied to his horse and assigned a personal Indian guard, Quinby turned to White Leaf. His face was as emotionless as the Indian's own, but a gleam bright as a bonfire light in his dark eyes.

"The troubles of your people are at an end," he said. "Bid them go back to their allotments, where henceforth they may dwell in peace!"

The patriarch, born to stoicism even in the hour of great joy, reached out, with not a word, to grasp the hand of the tribe's friend in need and in deed.

"And you, Push Ahead"—Quinby turned to the subchief—"make quickly for your wikiup, that you may change the grief of Mary Merry back to joy and pride. As my first lieutenant, Touching Cloud rides with me to-night, but he will soon return, and perhaps not alone. The love of the Day has dawned and all brief must be banished from your house."

The cavalcade was well started toward the Corkscrew when Quinby ranged up alongside Winona, riding with the Ute maiden and the Cloud.

Gladly the lovers fell back to enjoy alone the silences and broken words of vows too long delayed. No triumph would have shown on the inspector's

face, had there been light to see. The gleam had left his eyes.

"The party's over, Nona," he said. "You've been in at the finish, as per my promise. I reckon you'd better go home now and tell Illinoi' all about it. Sorry I can't jog along myself, but I'm no freer than my prisoners until I see them safe in jail. Likely Daybreak will keep you company."

She turned to him. "Anything you say goes tonight, I guess, but I would like to know——"

"Of course you would," he interrupted. "You see, I had a fair general idea of the plot that day I went to town by way of Star Square Ranch, although I was high-sky as to the plotters. But after Shorty overdid the hospitality stuff by turning me loose in Mills' room to brush up—— On his bureau, pardner, stood a frame photograph of himself in store clothes that gave me the big tip.

"That first day I met up with you and him, I had a hunch that somewhere I'd seen him before. But I forgot it, as folks do, the moment they get used to a stranger's face. Well, I hadn't seen him before, but I *had* seen that picture in our little, between-ourselves rogues' gallery at the bureau back in Washington. As soon as I glimmed the duplicate, I placed him as a crook who had engineered an unsuccessful land grab up in the Blackfoot country several years ago. From that moment things began to roll like a snowball going downhill.

"I reckon"—the inspector paused, glanced at the silent figure bending to the movements of her horse —"I reckon," he forced himself to continue, "that you are plumb surprised."

"Yes," she said; "never so surprised in my life."

He was relieved that she had managed to speak at all. "But you'll get over that soon, little scout. It won't be long until you're jolly glad you never brought your Artie around to the point."

"Why, you poor, old, wise silly!" She turned toward him unexpectedly. "Don't you suppose I've refused him regularly—a dozen times, at least?"

"Then you don't—you didn't——" he stammered.

"Say, because I'm surprised out of my usual breath supply, doesn't mean that I'm heartbroken!"

For once Quinby's self-control forsook him. "You aren't? You—you—aren't?" he gasped.

"Not even cracked in that delicate organ," she snapped. "But I can't for the life of me see why you're so upset over failing to break a perfect lady's perfectly sound heart. I should think, Alec, you'd be glad that——"

"Then I reckon you can stand hearing how I came to take after you to-night," he interrupted. "That day I ate grub at the Star, Sam Monday babbled something about how the Utes were likely to break bounds and attack some of the white women hereabouts. Next day in Circle, I saw the schoolma'am snag Mills into a session in the ice-cream parlor off the square. Then, early this evening, when I got to the agency and Annie told me about mother's deathbed telegram—when I knew dinged well that the lady wasn't blessed with a living mother—— Well, the minute I heard you'd been elected as escort, a great light dawned."

"That's more than it has on me," Winona urged. "Just why——"

"Short Cake O. K.'d my suspicions just now. The attack was a fake, as you'll see, too, if you think back, but with a double-barreled object. Sandy Mills was planted up here in the woods to jump in and rescue you from the bloodthirsty, rampagin' reds—his own employees. I don't need to diagram the object of that, do I?"

Winona laughed ruefully. "In common decency I'd have had to be grateful, I suppose."

"That was to be private and particular between yourselves, I reckon. But as an accelerator of public sentiment against the Indians, an attack on white women can't be beat. The gang would have heralded the outrage so far and wide that the Utes wouldn't have been able to change their warpath minds if they'd wished to."

"And Violet?"

"Humph!" Quinby's most expressive word bottled his indignation. "I don't know just what you ought to call a lady that can't tell black from white when it comes to English as she is spoken. But one thing is sure—we'll be needing a teacher that can, over at the agency."

"When I predicted a scrap between you two"—Winona's mind evidently had harked back to the larger issue—"I was thinking of another kind."

"What kind?"

"Why, the kind you read about, where two men scrap over a fair damsel's hand. Not that mine's so fair——"

The inspector leaned over and gripped it, rein and all. "Then you suspected all along that I——"

"I knew all along—every natural-born girl does—

that the way to get a stubborn man that doesn't know his own mind fighting mad is to flaunt another one in his face. Besides, I thought our Artie ought to have his chance. You see, I'd heard him talk so much about himself that I got to thinking maybe he was a great man in disguise, but for somebody else—never, I swear it, for me!"

As she leaned toward him in the darkness to answer the intense query of his eyes, a light flooded up from Quinby's heart more radiant than any which he had seen before.

"You mean to say, my beloved——"

"Brat," he had been about to add. But he stopped, caught with the sufficiency of what he already had said. He realized that he had come to think of her as just his beloved, with all memory of the brat left out. And she—with that look in her eyes!

"My beloved," he repeated firmly, with a period, rather than a dash by way of punctuation.

"We're different enough, in spite of our black hair," she declared with like decision.

"The wagon road is just ahead." Quinby spoke hurriedly for him. "Our trails split for a little while," he said, stretching out his arms. "Now that I know you're not hankering for somebody else," I'm ready—quite ready to tell you all."

He found her arms ready, too.

THE END.

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